25¢
FEB.

RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

MINX OF SINGING RIVER
by MARIAN O'HEARN

A KISS MEANS WAR
by A. C. ABBOTT

NEXT ISSUE—PUBLISHED JANUARY 25TH

25c

RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

Vol. 9 February, 1952 No. 1

Novelettes of the Romantic West

MINX OF SINGING RIVER.....*Marian O'Hearn* 14
Headstrong Ginnie thought her lips could change the brand on any man's heart.

HIGH-RIDIN' LADY.....*Val Gendron* 44
When Marny tried to stampede a blonde, she lost her beau in the shuffle.

A KISS MEANS WAR.....*A. C. Abbott* 58
With her ranch at stake, Vicki had to let loose an arsenal of kisses.

STAMPEDE TO PARADISE.....*Ennen Reaves Hall* 90
Pert Jude was a man-hater from way back—until an outlaw caught her off guard.

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Pioneer Love Stories

DYNAMITE FOR HIRE.....*Darlene du Bois* 35
Into Jud's life walked a lady bookkeeper—with more on her mind than books.

LOVE'S LOST OUTPOST.....*Ben T. Young* 82
Barbara had to learn that a declaration of independence doesn't rope a man.

Copyright 1944 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Little Hellcat of Hat Creek."

Features and Departments

PEN PARDS.....*A Department* 6
A friendly howdy from pen pals all over the world.

POSE FOR TWO.....*The Editor* 12
Preview look-see at Art Lawson's "Men in Them Thar Hills!"

NEEDLE CIRCLE.....*A Department* 57
A page of patterns for all sagehens who sew.

RECORD WRANGLING.....*Arizona Blake* 78
Have you sent in a vote for your favorite Western singer?

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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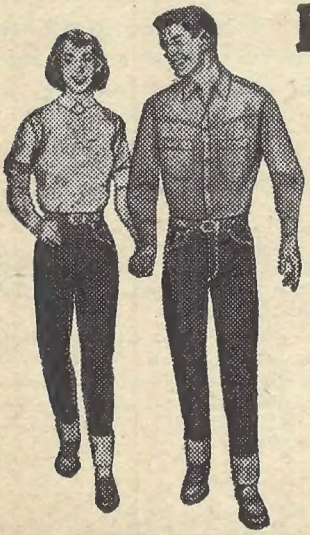

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Pen Pards

HERE'S a great big howdy from a lot of rannies and gals who'd like nothing better than to find a letter from you waiting in their mailbox. How about it, pards? Have you more friends than you want, more mail than you can read? Then help yourself to plenty of both, for the price of ink and a stamp. Send a letter winging off to one of these folks today—you'll find the name and address at the end of each letter—and join the happy roundup of R-L Pen Pards.

Phyllis and Fisticuffs

Dear Editor,

Here's a lover of cowboy music, aged 17, who would like to get her name in the Pen Pards column. I'm a senior in school, have blonde hair, blue-green eyes and stand 5 ft. 5 in. tall.

I like all sports—including wrestling and boxing—roller skating, dancing and writing letters. I would like pen pals from Idaho, Montana, Tennessee and anywhere else. Also any age. I've got loads of stationery just waiting to be used, so help me get rid of some of it.

PHYLISS DAVIDAVAGE
501 W. Pine Street
Mahanoy City, Penna.

(Continued on page 8)

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RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

(Continued from page 6)

Cute Canadian

Dear Editor,

Have you room for a Canadian girl on your wonderful page? I'm 16 years old, have golden brown hair, brown eyes, stand 5 ft. 4 in. tall and weigh 125 lbs. I live on a ranch eight miles from town. I especially enjoy horseback riding and have a roan saddle horse of my own.

I also like doing fancywork and reading Western magazines. Come on, all of you 16 to 22 years, living on ranches in the U.S.A. and Alberta, write to me. I'll answer all letters coming my way and will appreciate snapshots.

EILEEN AHASILOW
Box 182
Maple Creek, Saskatchewan, Can.

Married and From Maine

Dear Editor,

I would like to hear from girls and women all over the world. I am a married woman of thirty. My husband works away during the week and is just home weekends, so you can see I get kind of lonesome. I have two children, aged 4 and 7.

My height is 5 ft. 1 in., and I have blonde hair and green eyes. My hobbies are reading, sewing and roller skating. I hope I'll receive lots and lots of letters.

MRS. GLENDA NISBET
56 Middle Street
Hallowell, Maine

Pretty Peach

Dear Editor,

As writing is my hobby, I would like to write to lots and lots of pards between the ages of 19 and 30. I'm 20 years old and work with the State as a typist-clerk. I'm 5 ft. 6 in. tall, have black hair and brown eyes. I tip the scales at 120 lbs. Besides writing, I love to read and go to movies. I promise to answer all letters promptly, so please write me and help me keep up with my hobby.

VERGIE SUTTON
Box 42
Pembroke, Ga.

Scots Laddie

Dear Editor:

I should like very much to have my letter printed in your Pen Pards column.

Firstly, as you can imagine from my address, I am a Scotsman. Besides that, I am learning to fly, and in my spare time can be found roaming around the country, climbing our many mountains. When I'm not on the mountains, I am dancing, skating, playing tennis, reading or writing to my many pen pals from Kansas to California

(Continued on page 10)

Give yourself an even break!

I. C. S. training is a key to advancement. Here's how three men cashed in on these down-to-earth home study courses.

"After serving with the U. S. Army Air Forces in World War II, I went to work for a sign company. Decided to take an I. C. S. course in Show Card and Sign Lettering to get ahead. Soon after beginning the course I became a partner in another sign company, and after finishing my I. C. S. training, I started my own sign business in California."

"When I enrolled for my I. C. S. Aeronautical Engineer's Course, I was an Aircraft Crew Alert, Grade 10, Step 2, but now I'm an Aircraft Service Mechanic, Grade 15, Step 3, at Scott Air Force Base, Belleville, Illinois. My advancement brought an increase in salary of 45.2%. The Progress Reports sent my employer played a very important part in my promotion. Many a time, your lessons went right on the job with me!"

"I signed up for I. C. S. training while working in a plant. Right away things happened. You might say that promotions outstripped my ability to keep up with my I. C. S. lessons. Recently I was made foreman of the welding setup and Assembly Department, and now I'm in charge of training three other men for promotion. Naturally, I'm determined to finish my I. C. S. training."

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(Continued from page 8)

to Australia. Needless to say, my reason for writing is to gain new pen friends. Age is no question, for letters from anyone from 14 to 60 will be greatly appreciated. Either sex, too.

As for a brief description of myself—I am 19 years old, have dark hair, am 5 ft. 10 in. tall and weigh 155 lbs.

In conclusion I should like to say that I am a firm believer in pen pals. I have made many friends by this means and thoroughly believe that some of my best friends have been those I have never seen.

Please write me.

DON McKERNAN
74 Ardgowan Street
Glasgow, Cs.
Scotland

Green-Eyed Carol

Dear Editor,

I am a junior in high school, aged 16, blonde-haired and green-eyed. I stand 5 ft. 7½ in. tall and my favorite sports are basketball, football, swimming and dancing. I also collect stamps and picture postcards.

Will all you boys and girls, 16 to 21 years of age, please write to me, as I will be very glad to hear from you?

CAROL CONNELL
10 Upland Road
Wakefield, Mass.

Plucky Maxine

Dear Editor:

Please publish this letter, as I'm flat on my back and all I can do for a year or more is write letters. I'm 14 years old, 5 ft. 9 in. tall and weigh 119 lbs. I have gray eyes and dark brown hair.

I love music of any kind except opera. I also like hiking, picnicking and swimming.

I would love to hear from guys and gals all over the U.S. and Canada. I promise I'll answer all letters. So come on—help out a temporary invalid.

MISS MAXINE MEDFORD
W.N.C. Sanatorium
Black Mountain, N. C.

Canadian Cutie

Dear Editor:

Is it possible for a Canadian girl to get her first plea in Pen Pards?

I am a seventeen-year-old girl who very much would like her post office box full of letters.

I am 5 ft. 2 in. tall, weigh 120, and have green eyes and dark brown hair more than shoulder length. I live on a large farm and help with the farm work. My hobbies are horseback riding, reading, writing to pen pals, collecting snapshots, and baseball. In our local baseball team I played as catcher. My favorite hobby is dancing. I'm an expert dancer, have a Plymouth car and attend all dances and movies in the local town.

I would like pen pals from any state or foreign country, between the ages of 16 and 25.

Come on, boys and girls. Fill my mailbox.

MISS IRENE CHETEK
Smoky Lake
Alberta, Canada

Message From Garcia

Dear Editor:

I would like, if I may, to have my name placed in your column. I would like to hear from anyone who is interested.

I stand 6 ft. tall, and my weight is 200 lbs. I am considered very husky. I will exchange photographs with all who write, and give detailed replies to all the questions that they care to ask.

My hobbies are traveling and swimming. In my spare time I compose poems. I enjoy writing and can write long letters when time permits, and time I have a lot of. Oh, yes, my age is 25.

Come on, everyone, please write.

JUAN M. GARCIA
813 4th St., N.E.
Washington 2, D.C.

The Taller the Better

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely girl of 17. I would like to write to fellows and girls from all over the world. Service men are most welcome, too.

I have light brown hair and green eyes, and a fair complexion. I love to swim, dance, read, make friends and write letters. I'm a very tall girl—almost six feet—so I'd love to hear from six-footers.

My favorite singers are Perry Como, Tony Martin, Vaughan Monroe and Billy Eckstine.

Come on, you fellows and gals. I promise to answer all letters immediately.

CATHY BISHOP
117 Lincoln Ave.
Manville, N. J.

A Trooper's Tale

Dear Editor:

This is the first time I have written to RANGELAND LOVE STORIES, and I hope to gather many friends and pen pals.

I am 23 years old, have brown hair and eyes. I am 5 ft. 9 in. tall and weigh 145 lbs. My favorite sports are baseball, swimming and dancing. I am a lonely soldier in Panama and would like to hear from boys and girls everywhere. Will answer all letters and exchange photos.

SGT. WILBER G. ROWLETTE RA14234993
Troop 'A' 45th Cavary
Ft. Clayton, Canal Zone

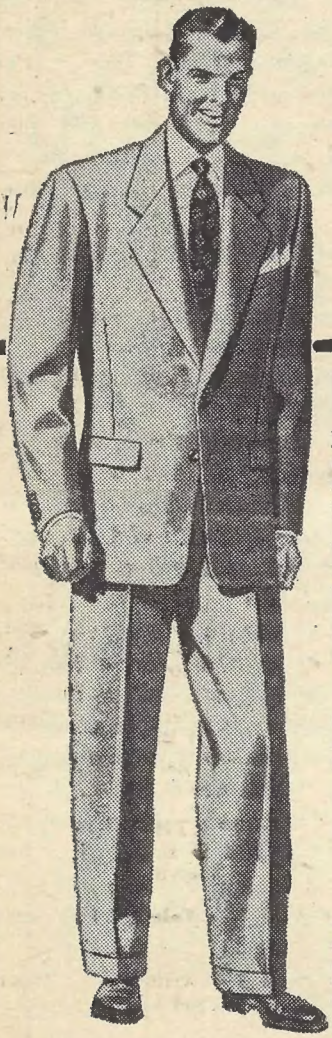
Florida Cowgirl

Dear Editor:

How 'bout putting a horse-lover's letter in your column?

(Continued on page 110)

I need 500 Men to wear SAMPLE SUITS!



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POSE FOR TWO

STEP right up, folks, for Doc Hooley's Traveling Variety Show! It's coming to town next issue, and it's got everything from a lady photographer (name of Jenny Ross) to Princess Hookilooki, siren of the South Seas (who is really Edythe from Brooklyn). But fake or not, the Princess has struck pay dirt in the appreciative miners of Hangtown Gap—especially one Tough Luck Craig, whom Jenny thought she'd claimed for her own.

Here's a sample of the fireworks:

Tough Luck Craig made a production of the evening's ride with the belle of Hangtown Gap. He rented the best surrey at the Nugget Livery, had it polished up and two matched bays put into the harness, and set off to pick up the Princess. She looked mighty nice in that big hat and the green silk outfit and tiny golden shoes that exactly matched the color of her hair. She had a smile for everybody, even for Jenny when they drove up before Jenny's studio.

"We want a picture took," Tough Luck said. "Spare no expense."

"If you can figure a way of getting the sun back I'll make that photograph," Jenny offered. They sure made a gallant couple, she had to admit, while her broken heart broke into even more pieces. "It's too late; the sun's too low. The picture wouldn't come out. And besides—"

Then Jenny had an inspiration. She had tried magnesium wire flares at night, but never during the afternoon. If they'd work in pitch dark, why not in partial sunlight? Worth a try, anyway.

While a few miners gathered around, Jenny set up her camera. It was a big ten-by-fourteen Anthony and Company affair usually kept for taking landscapes or portraits of very important people.

Since this was an experiment that she had never performed before, she was very careful to get everything right. With the camera in place, she called for volunteers to light the magnesium flares. Two grizzled old-timers who had done a lot of hard-rock prospecting stepped up. Jenny told them to stand well back of the camera and to set fire to the wires when she hollered: "Go!"

"Now you—" Jenny said to Edythe—"don't grin like that. You look as if you were biting the thread after sewing a button on some guy's shirt. And you—" she shouted at Tough Luck—"look like you're going to a funeral."

The crowd crowed with pleasure. Edythe had been showing all her teeth, and Tough Luck had been looking rather piously smug. Now that both of them were wearing somewhat quizzical expressions, Jenny hollered: "Go!"

The men touched matches to their flares. Jenny uncapped the lens of her big camera. The burning magnesium made a brilliant light for a second or so while the image of the scene was implanted upon the plate within the camera. Then Tough Luck's hired horses, who had never experienced anything like this, bolted. They lit out straight up the street, paying no attention to anything, dragging the light surrey behind them like the tail behind a fox. They ripped up the main street, careening wildly, aimed for the gulch, and disappeared.

Jenny choked with laughter, although she had not really expected anything like this. Then she grew sober. Laughing at Tough Luck Craig was all very well, but it wasn't what she wanted.

The complete story of Jenny and her exotic rival will appear in Art Lawson's "Men in Them Thar Hills!", in the next issue, out Jan. 25th.

THE EDITOR.

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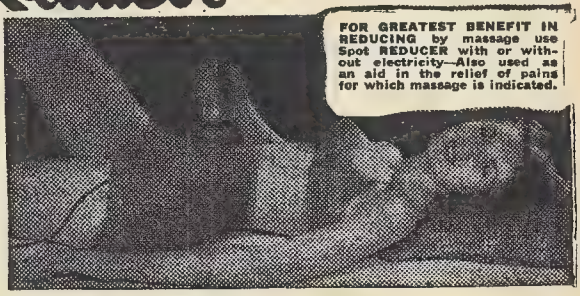

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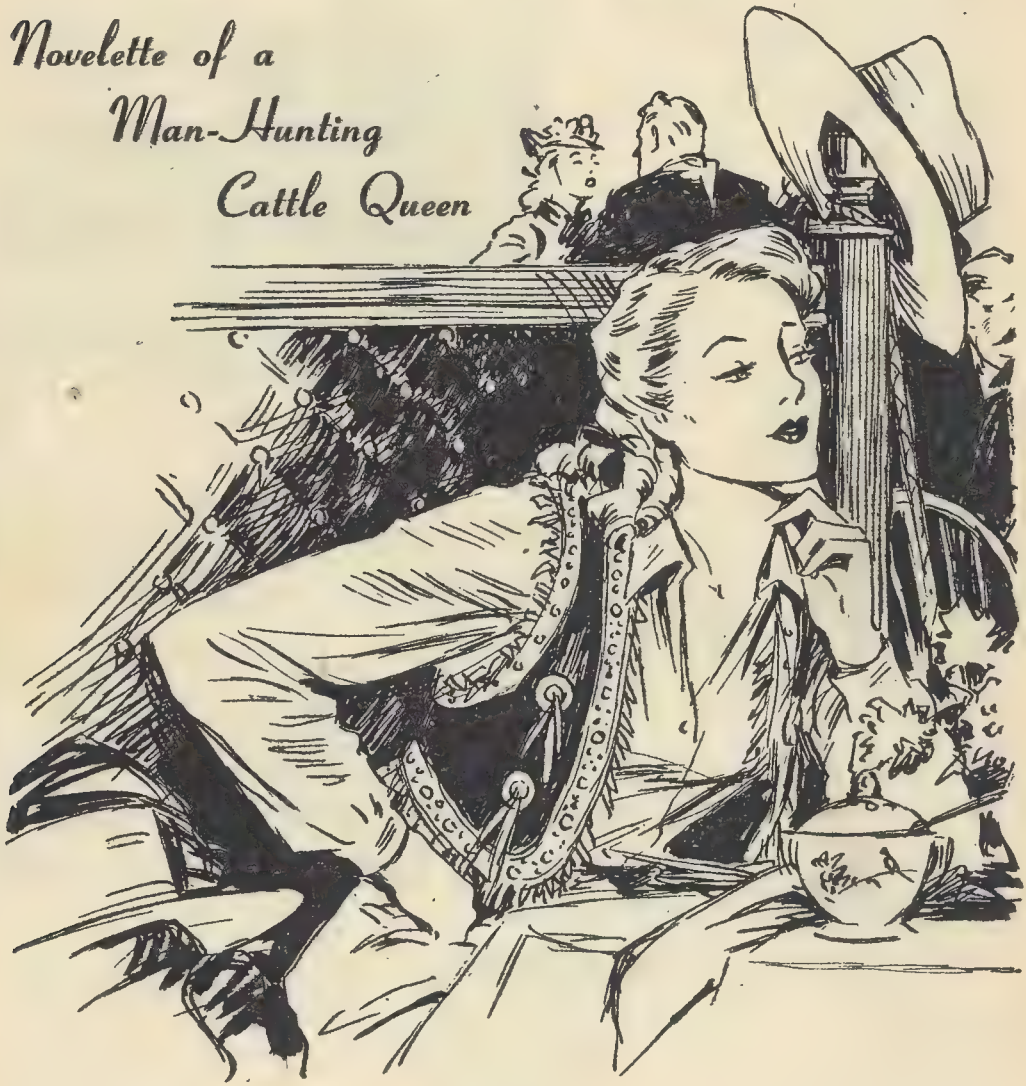
MINX OF SINGING RIVER

Novelette of a Man-Hunting Cattle Queen



To a headstrong prairie princess like Ginnie, no hombre was worth roping—unless he wore another girl's brand.

Mary looked directly at Ginnie. "I simply have to talk to Vince—alone."

By Marian O'Hearn

CHAPTER ONE

Campaign for Romance

THE sun was spraying its first pale yellow into the sky when Ginnie reined in near the top of Dwarf Hill and looked back at the wagon trail. Directly below was the home range of the Half Moon Ranch, and beyond the road lay the whitely gleaming gates that led to the ranch house.

She let her glance run over the trail to the bend where it twisted out of sight and reappeared as a thin, curving line leading across the distant flatlands to River City

Sheriff Vince Taber should be nearing the Half Moon by this time. Her father had said that the young sheriff intended to leave town at dawn, but Ginnie could not hear even the faintest echo of hoofs. He had probably been delayed. There were always so many things to delay a lawman.

Well, she didn't mind waiting . . . Her lips stirred into the shadow of a smile, shaped by the thought of triumph. He would come soon and see her, exultant with life, against the radiant background of the morning sky.

Her faintly smiling lips curved into sudden brilliance. She had planned it carefully. While dressing, she had considered every detail of the picture she would create. Her riding outfit was new and completely becoming. Smartly cut tan breeches, brown silk shirt, soft leather boots, dark brown Stetson and a neckerchief of basalt blue. A costume designed to stress every fluid, young line of her body and mould firmly curving feminine flesh to sharp clarity.

Her hair, pale as sheened yellow poppies and growing from a gleaming widow's peak on her forehead, was a dramatic frame for her oval face. The sun had tinted her skin to a warm beige that was exactly the right contrast for her hair. Thick black lashes smudged shadows into her river blue eyes. And her mouth, full-fleshed and clearly, gently drawn, was the color of dark coral.

In the early sunlight, Ginnie seemed a creature of winged vitality, of special aliveness. She was so aware of life that it was surging exhilaration in her senses and a full, exciting taste in her mouth.

A shadow flickering on the curve of the slope caught her attention. A shadow only a few feet away which had not been there a moment before. She kept her eyes fixed on the trail, her senses tense with listening. The shadow had been made by a man. Then she let out her breath and cried with sudden relief: "Dad!"

Her father was standing a few feet away motionless, watching her with an amused grin on his thin, predatory mouth. "Good morning, Regina. You can stop posturing and posing. It's only your father."

"How'd you get here?"

He chuckled and strode toward her. "I'd just left the spread when I heard a pony starting away at top speed. I knew it couldn't be one of the outfit, so I turned back for a look and saw you heading for Dwarf Hill. That made me curious so I circled around to come up the other side. Left my pony below."

As he finished, the chuckle turned into deep, appreciative laughter. Cameron was a handsome man of fifty, with crisp, silver hair, appraising brown eyes and a thin, hawk nose. His face was marked by a robust humor that made it seem genial. But beneath the geniality was harsh strength, revealed by the predatory mouth, the block-like chin and imperious nose.

Color lifted into Ginnie's cheeks. Then as she met her father's eyes, laughter also threaded through her voice. "You must have been violently curious."

"Not any longer. There's only one reason you'd get up in the middle of the night to watch the wagon road. Young Sheriff Taber."

The thin crimson in her cheeks brightened. "You might be right," she murmured. "Any objections?"

"No." His appraising look was frankly proud. "Taber's all right. A real he-hombre who's tough enough to get places. If you want him, take him."

The girl's smile acknowledged his pride in her. Accepted it as openly as it was given, for they understood each other so well that there was no need of subterfuge.

"I will if I can, Dad," she said. "But Mary Wilson saw him first. I was visiting in San Francisco when he came here to take the sheriff's job. By the time I got back, she'd practically put her brand on him."

Cameron's laughter was even richer with amusement. "I don't think that'll bother you, honey. The only permanent brand is the one put on at the altar. But listen—isn't that a pony heading up trail? I'd better get out of sight, fast. Good luck, Regina."

GINNIE waved good-by to him, then lifted the reins and hurriedly rode down the slope. She must be on the trail, near the Half Moon gates, so Vince would think she had just left the ranch. She prodded her mount again and reached the road just as Taber's pony shot around the bend.

Pulling her horse to a stop, she waited for the young sheriff to ride up, her expression one of pleased surprise. "Hi, Vince!" she called. "Hello!"

Vince Taber checked his pony's speed and waved. As he reined in, Ginnie smiled.

"Hello, again," she said. "What are you doing out here at this hour? Or don't you have to sleep?"

"Not enough time for it." His glance dropped from her poppy-pale hair to her boots and lifted back to her face. Vince Taber was dark and tall, with a compact, fit body. His hair was black, his eyes night gray. His features were straight, almost classic, with an unyielding mouth and chin.

But it was his darkness which caught at the girl's mind and senses. This darkness was a quality as well as coloring. A puzzling, disquieting quality. A blazing inner intensity. Or a fierceness hidden in dusky shadows.

When he kissed her, she wondered, would she know what the shadows concealed? Or would that part of him remain out of reach, escape her? An acid-sweetness filled her mouth. Yes, his kiss might give her the answer.

"You still haven't told me why you're on Singing River range at sunrise," she said, tilting her head to let the light drop into the deep, river blue of her eyes.

"I'm heading for the Crossed Pine section to take a look at that bunch of shiftless gold tramps who are squatting there."

"More trouble?"

"Yeah." The eyes flared with light and his mouth hardened. "There was a holdup last night. Len Wheeler of the Double Horseshoe was taking his payroll money from the bank in River City to his spread. Just outside of town, two hombres stopped him. They took his payroll money and his horse, and headed north. Several people saw a pony carrying double on this wagon trail traveling in the direction of Crossed Pine. The two men riding him looked like squatters."

"Another holdup!" Ginnie cried. "Won't anything stop these crimes and get rid of the gold tramps?"

"That's what I'm looking for." His night-gray eyes smiled gravely into hers. "A way to do both."

"You will." The words were low as a murmur, warm as soft laughter.

"Yes, I'll stop them." Stillness settled over his face. A hard stillness through which the dark intensity drove even more fiercely. "I've got to." Growing harshness made his voice raw. "They're a blight, deadlier than any range war. And more of them are pouring in every day. They're penniless, hungry and ragged, but they're more than able to steal, destroy and kill. I'll find the answer and when I do—" He broke off, and the darkness in him was like black flame. The leashed thing had almost broken through the shadows.

Ginnie's pulse beat lifted into a ragged tattoo. She wanted to touch him, to trace the suddenly hardened shape of his mouth with her finger tips . . .

"It's at least another hour's ride to Crossed Pine. Why don't you come in and have breakfast with me?"

The night-gray glance thrust against the surface of her eyes. "I sure wish I could, but I want to catch up with those gold squatters before they begin to expect me."

"Yes, of course." Her coral mouth lost

its vivid curve. "I really knew you couldn't. I was just thinking of how nice it would be not to eat alone."

"Alone? Doesn't anyone else on the Half Moon have breakfast?"

Her lip corners tilted faintly, wistfully. "Dad's always out of the house before daylight and Mother never gets up until after nine o'clock."

Taber grinned and light sparked in his night-gray eyes. "I think I'll change my mind. A cup of coffee would taste good right now."

"Wonderful! Come on." She lifted the reins and wheeled her pony. "I'm hungry. Suddenly very hungry, now that I'm going to have comapny!"

THEY cantered across the yard to the hitchrack and Ginnie led the way into the house. As she opened the dining room door, the young sheriff paused and his face warmed with almost boyish pleasure. Sunlight was pouring through open windows onto the delicate green of the rug, shimmering on polished wood, making new patterns on the gay yellow cloth and sharpening the gleam of the table silver.

"Nice," he murmured. "I'm glad I stopped."

"So am I." As she smiled up at him, buoyant awareness surged through her, deepening her eyes. She sat down hurriedly, indicating the chair beside her. "This is your place." An hour before she had rearranged the dining chairs, planning the atmosphere of these moments. The two of them, side by side at the charmingly appointed table, with a growing sense of nearness and finally one arm brushing carelessly, lightly, against another.

"I hope Mrs. Bancroft has breakfast ready." She rang a tiny silver bell.

The house-keeper, a firm-mouthed, middle-aged woman, brought in a huge tray holding a heavy silver coffee pot and several covered serving dishes.

"Good morning," Ginnie said, smiling as the woman's glance darted toward Vince. "This is Sheriff Taber."

"Good morning." Mrs. Bancroft's tone was cool. "Good morning, sir. Is there anything else you'd like?"

"No, indeed, ma'am. This looks wonderful."

Mrs. Bancroft made a swift, silent exit.

Ginnie poured the coffee. "Just how long have you been in Singing River?" she asked.

"Eight weeks. I was offered the sheriff's job six months ago but I needed time to think about it."

"Dad said that Mister Cooper told him you were the best lawman in the Missouri Territory. No one really expected you to make the change."

The darkness glowed behind his face and his mouth thinned. "I left Missouri because of the political setup. It'd gotten so that lawmen in that part of the territory were expected to look the other way if an outlaw had the right friends."

"And you reached Singing River two months ago." Her voice lowered and became thoughtful. "I was in San Francisco then, and after I got back we didn't meet very often. Even then, it was always in a crowd. Strange, isn't it? As if something —Fate itself—meant to keep us apart."

Light shot up to the surface of his gray eyes. "That sounds as if you'd done some thinking about it—about me."

She laughed, making the sound quick and light. "This," she went one, "is the first time we've really been together. Our first chance to discover each other."

Light flared his glance. "Yes," he said. "And I like it. Maybe I like it too much." He turned toward her, and his arm touched the thin silk of her sleeve. His face was close, and behind it was the fierce, dusky glow.

"I thought about you, too," he said. "But you seemed part of another world. A lovely vision that disappeared as quickly as it came and—" He broke off abruptly.

Ginnie's face tilted, and she looked at him through heavy-lidded eyes.

"What were you going to say?" she murmured.

The light in his eyes exploded into white fires; the fierce, leashed thing was moving out of the concealing shadows. Abruptly, he bent and kissed her. His mouth, pressing briefly down on hers, felt cool and unyielding. He was still holding her away, forcing her away.

His lips left hers and he said quickly, harshly: "I didn't have any right to do that. I'm sorry. Really sorry."

She touched his arm. "Maybe you did have a right." The words were a whisper and her coral-red lips were directly beneath his, waiting.

"No. You see—"

He broke off and once more took her mouth. There was nothing unyielding or cool in this kiss. Instead it was a storm shaking the senses. A storm driving from the fierce darkness within him. The tattooing pulses beat in her veins.

He straightened sharply, almost angrily. "Ginnie, there's something I have to explain. I should have told you before."

Her slim hand darted up to his mouth and stopped his words. "There's nothing to explain," she said. "We just had breakfast together." Her voice lowered and took on the quality of soft laughter. "We had a few minutes together. That's all. And now, if you still intend to ride to Crossed Pine, isn't it time to leave?"

His glance reached for her eyes, puzzled, questioning. "I guess you're right." He pushed back his chair and stood up. "Thanks for—everything, Ginnie. So long."

She followed him to the door, where she watched him get into the saddle and start toward the gate. When he turned onto the wagon road, she walked smilingly back to her room. Stripping off her riding clothes, she put on a thin blue silk nightgown and got into bed.

Arising at dawn was an unpleasant experience she did not intend to repeat. Nor would it be necessary, for now it would be simple to see Vince Taber as often as she wished. He had been puzzled by her refusal to let him explain why he shouldn't have kissed her. A smile edged across her mouth. As long as he believed she did not know about Mary Wilson, she could shape the situation to fit her plans.

CHAPTER TWO

Luscious Little Rattler

GINNIE frowned at the dressing table mirror. Something wasn't quite right. Her glance hurried from her navy blue Stetson, down over the blue silk shirt, the gray whipcord breeches, to the black Spanish leather boots. Finally, she pulled off the Stetson, picked up a brush and smoothed her pale-poppy hair into softer lines. Putting the hat on again, she adjusted it carefully and stepped back for another view of her reflection.

Her eyes were still fixed on the mirror when the bedroom door opened and her mother looked in on her.

"That's another new outfit, isn't it?" Mrs. Cameron asked quietly.

"Yes, it just arrived the day before yesterday. On the stage from San Francisco."

Louise Cameron's fine blue eyes became even cooler. A fair, slim woman with prematurely graying hair, she seemed shut off from everything around her, guarded by high walls of her own making. "Your father's very generous."

The girl turned quickly. "That sounds as if—"

"You look lovely, dear," her mother broke in. "Almost beautiful."

Surprise made Ginnie's black lashes flick apart. "Only almost?" she asked Then the words turned into a delighted chuckle, and she put an arm around her mother's shoulders. "You're a funny sort

of parent," she said indulgently. "Most mothers believe their daughters are the world's most gorgeous gals."

"I meant—but never mind. I want to talk to you, Ginnie. I called on Mrs. Ormlee at the Linked O yesterday and Mary Wilson was there."

Ginnie stiffened. "Well?"

"Mary's a fine girl. Simple, honest and genuine."

"I'm glad you like her."

"She's very much in love with Vince Taber."

"Maybe." Ginnie's eyes became blue iron. "Is there any special reason for telling me about it?"

"Yes. I got up unusually early yesterday morning and started for the dining room. The door was open and—you and Vince Taber were at the breakfast table."

Ginnie met her mother's glance with eyes that were still unreadable. "It's possible that I'm in love with him, too."

"No, you're not. He interests you because he's new and different. And because he's the only man in Singing River who hasn't been added to your collection."

Warmth rushed into Ginnie's throat and lifted to her face. "You're wrong. Vince means more to me than anyone I've ever known. He's everything I want. Mary Wilson didn't give him time to think. When I got home less than a month after he arrived, she was already pretending he was her property. But he isn't!"

"Please! They're engaged. Mrs. Ormlee's planning an announcement party for them."

"I don't believe it. Even if I did, it wouldn't make any difference."

"It has to make a difference!" Mrs. Cameron caught her daughter's arm and forced Ginnie to face her. "I don't have to tell you facts you already know," she said. "The Wilsons have been struggling against poverty for years. That little spread of theirs barely supports the family. Mary's worked very hard and had very little. She's brought up her younger brother and sister and—" She stopped once more, her blue eyes appraising Ginnie. "But there's nothing I can say that'll change you. You'll take what you want, no matter who gets hurt. I know that, Regina."

The girl's chin went up as suddenly as if she had been slapped. *Regina.* Her mother had always hated the name her father had insisted upon giving her; she had never called her anything except Ginnie. Until now, when she had used it as an expression of contempt.

Ginnie's lips parted, struggling for words, but her mother had left the room.

Regina. The queen. Ginnie stared at the closed door until tears stung her eyes. The truth was inescapable. The chill disapproval—almost dislike—her mother displayed toward her father now also extended to her. That had been made too clear to doubt.

For a moment Ginnie hesitated. Perhaps her mother was right. Perhaps there was too much of her father's headstrong imperiousness in her. Then hurt pride and anger took command. Her mother had no right to side with another girl. She had turned against her own daughter—and that made Ginnie completely free to go on with her plans.

Picking up her gloves and quirt, she went out. In an hour she would be in River City with Vince Taber . . . .

BEYOND the wide, flat-roofed veranda, the sunlight was hard, dazzling silver. Ginnie pushed her lashes together against the glare, and a faint frown struck into the flesh between her brows. Her pony had not been brought around, although she had ordered it half an hour ago.

Her glance hurried over the yard, moving from the small bunkshed to the big one that screened the barns and corrals from view. What could have happened? The Half Moon outfit was not careless

about orders. Bob Cameron did not permit carelessness.

She started impatiently into the yard, then stopped at the sound of iron-shod hoofs clicking on hard ground. Maybe the wrangler was finally bringing her mount!

The chunking of hoofs continued, but they were moving at a slow walk. Finally a man appeared, leading a horse around the bunkshed. He ambled unhurriedly toward the house, smoke spiraling from a cigarette plastered to one corner of his mouth.

Ginnie stared through lowered lashes. Obviously, he was a new hand. She did not remember seeing him before. He was ragged and unkempt as a discarded scarecrow, a young, awkward boy.

In spite of the dangling cigarette, he managed a broad grin. "Howdy, ma'am. Guess this bronc's for you."

"I'll say it is. I've been waiting a half hour for it." She looked at him sharply. "When did you start working for the Half Moon?"

"This morning, ma'am. The foreman hired me yesterday."

"What part of the range did you come from?"

"I didn't come from the range, ma'am. We—my folks and I—joined the gold rush to California. We went busted and started back, heading for Colorado, but this is as far as we got."

Ginnie's eyes darkened, became a smoking blue. This coltish youth was part of the horde of criminal beggars pouring into Singing River. And he was here, on the Half Moon! "I see," she said, her tone a stinging whip. "Another gold tramp."

The boy's grin ended abruptly and his face whitened. "I know a lot of people call us that, ma'am," he said evenly, "but we're not tramps. We failed as prospectors, sure, but—"

"We won't discuss the matter," the girl cut in. "The foreman made a mistake. Tell him to give you a week's pay. Then leave the ranch at once."

"Just a minute!" The words came from behind her. Ginnie spun around and saw a man stepping through the door onto the veranda. His gaze was hard and driving as his voice.

"Sorry to horn in, ma'am," he said. "I'd like a word with the kid."

Ginnie's breath raked hotly over her parted lips. The man had a strange, golden glance that seemed to scorch her own eyes, burning past them into her brain. "How did you get into the house?" she gasped. "Who are you?"

The chill golden flame flickered and his mouth changed, became edged with something she could not define but did not like.

"I'm Jake Hutchins of the Little B. I came to—"

"The Little B? The Larsen ranch?"

"It was the Larsen ranch until I bought it last week. I'm here to see Mr. Cameron about buying seed stock."

"He's not on the home spread."

"So Mrs. Cameron told me a couple of minutes ago. Does the explanation satisfy you? Or do I have to prove I'm not guilty of housebreaking?"

She lifted her chin and her eyes were smoking blue fury. "Maybe you'd better."

But he had turned and moved past her to the young wrangler. "Howdy, stranger." His voice was entirely different now, warm and friendly. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Bill Sadler."

"Glad to meet you." Hutchins held out his hand. "I guess the trek back from the gold diggings was tough going, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. For awhile it looked as if we wouldn't make it. Me and the folks just got here a couple of weeks ago."

"Where you living?"

Bill Sadler's smile was a bitter grimace. "We're camping on the range near Split Creek. We'd like to stay in Singing River but if we can't get work, we'll have to move on again."

"I can use another hand on the Little B.

How about it—would you want the job?"

The boy's eyes kindled. "Do you mean it?"

"Sure. You'll be on the payroll as soon as you show up at my ranch."

"Gee, thanks—thanks a lot, Mr. Hutchins!"

"The name's Jake, Bill."

"Okay, Jake." Grinning, he hurried across the yard toward the bunkshed without so much as a look at Ginnie.

GINNIE watched him go, her slim body very erect. The smoking metal blue of her eyes was flecked with new, glinting sparks, and a pulse of anger drummed in her brain.

Jake Hutchins turned, and the sunlight shimmered on his sunburned brown hair and the light, weathered copper of his skin. His face was strong-boned and spare-fleshed, the outline of jaws and chin angular. A homely face. But in spite of its bluntness, there was something about it. . . . There was a look about him which might be challenge or readiness. His wide-shouldered, long-legged body had the kind of poise that came from constant alertness, from never being off guard. The open holster holding his gun was worn low and strapped to his thigh. He was on guard even now.

His glance touched her, moved into her eyes. "I'll try to see Mr. Cameron later. Adios, ma'am. I left my pony at the bunkshed hitchrack."

"Not so fast!" Ginnie said. "You heard me fire that shiftless kid. Yet you hired him immediately, right in front of me."

"Why not?" The depths of his golden eyes flickered. "Since he was no longer working for the Half Moon, why shouldn't he work for me?"

"That's not the point. You're a stranger who came onto this ranch without being invited, and you had the—the—"

"Brass is the word you want, ma'am."

Streaks of crimson scorched across her cheeks. "You're right," she said. "You had the *brass* to interfere with the handling of the Half Moon outfit—with something which was none of your business."

"I figured it *was* my business." Light shifted in the depths of his eyes. "The kid needed a job and I needed another hand. Besides, weren't you talking out of turn, too? You're not the foreman of this spread, but you butted in and fired a man he'd just taken on. Most cowmen would quit if a mean-tempered female tried to run their job."

She stared at him, and a hard, shocked breath tore through her lips. The angry pulse in her brain became a wild, dizzying beat. *A mean-tempered female!* "Get off this spread!" she ordered.

"Sure." The lines of his mouth sharpened. "But why should the truth rowel you? You were plenty mean to Sadler."

"A shiftless tramp!"

"Tramps don't work. This kid is trying to earn a living for himself and his family. You treated him like a horsethief."

Hot words sprang to Ginnie's lips but died unspoken. There was something about this man that made him very hard to answer. His strange golden glance was fixed on her, and she suddenly felt uneasy, almost uncertain. The longer she hesitated, the more aware of him she became. The hot sunlight warmed the coppery tinge of his skin, outlined his big form with its hard masculine strength. There was power in him. A power which closed the space between them and brought him too near.

"You've just come to Singing River," she said finally, and was surprised at her own words, surprised that all anger had left her. "You can't know what we're facing. This range is going to have to fight for its life—and soon. When the first gold tramps showed up some months ago, no one minded, as long as they didn't squat on the wrong land. Then they began to pour in. A stream of hungry, desperate men, women and children. People who sold ev-

erything they owned to follow the gold rush and found starvation instead of wealth. They started back by any means they could find—some even traveling on foot—and when they reached Singing River, they decided to stay. More and more are coming in every day. They're squatting all over the range, stealing cattle, butchering them for food, robbing stores and pilfering. Some of them are banding together into outlaw gangs and staging holdups."

HIS glance pressed against her eyes, probed into them. The new, sudden warmth of his mouth seemed to make his lips fuller and more definitely shaped. Quick with life. . . . "I've heard about them. I've heard almost nothing else ever since I arrived in Singing River. It's a situation that can have a pretty ugly end."

"Then you should understand why we have to get rid of this riffraff."

"No. I don't see it that way, yet. If the prospectors commit so many crimes, why aren't they caught? If they were arrested and tried—"

"You make it sound very simple," Ginnie cut in. "But it's not that easy. The gold tramps are as clever as professional criminals. Probably a lot of them were lawbreakers before they ever started for California. Only one or two of them have been arrested—merely petty thieves. The others are too smart to leave a trail behind them."

The chill, golden flame flickered in his eyes. "Doesn't that sound peculiar to you?" he asked. "Do you believe these gold squatters—as you call 'em—are capable of planning or carrying out such jobs? Those I have seen are so busy scrabbling for a living, for food for their kids, they've no time or energy for anything else. Maybe that's why they haven't been caught—maybe they had nothing to do with the crimes."

"Please!" Impatience surged through Ginnie. "You don't realize the seriousness of the situation. Or maybe you're willing to see Singing River destroyed."

He grinned. "Hardly. I've got a stake in this range, too. But I won't have anything to do with driving the ex-prospectors out unless somebody digs up proof against them—proof of something worse than a few petty thefts. Until then they've a right to stay here and make a living. They're human beings. American citizens. Maybe they were fools to join the gold rush, but that just proves they're human."

"There was almost no crime or violence in the county before they came. Isn't that proof enough?"

"No. This wouldn't be the first time that a smart outlaw gang has taken advantage of such situations. They've been known to move into a district boiling with trouble and clean up, making it look as if the new arrivals were responsible."

"That doesn't sound possible."

"But it is. An hombre named Red Peacock, who used to boss one of the worst gangs in the Missouri Territory, often operated that way. What's going on in Singing River is typical of his methods. It's made me think. Almost seems to have his brand on it."

"If his gang was still in Kansas—"

"It could have moved, though I don't think it has. Red's in prison, serving five years for a mail robbery."

Ginnie's lips parted, but she did not speak. The sunlight had suddenly brightened again. It was fierce, dazzling silver. Liquid silver which was spilling across the shaded veranda and flowing around her. Jake Hutchins' nearness was pressing into her consciousness, making her aware of his hard-fleshed strength, of a power which was part of the life drive within him. The golden flame showed in the depths of his eyes again but it was no longer chill. Instead, it was warm, lifting brilliance. Brilliance which started a thousand alien drums beating in her blood.

This was crazy. Something almost savage about him was shaking her, twisting her thoughts into chaos. He was unimpor-

tant, mannerless, a stranger. And she wanted to get to River City and Vince Taber. She had to get rid of Hutchins, get away from him, at once.

"Your theories might be interesting in other parts of the country." She made her voice thin and crisp with amusement. "But gold tramps aren't wanted in Singing River. Nor are people who welcome them. Good-by, Mister Hutchins. I'll tell Dad you were here."

"Then you're his daughter. I thought so, though you're prettier than I expected."

"Expected?"

"Yes. A lot of people have told me about you. They said you were a beautiful girl with the disposition of a rattler—and they didn't exaggerate on either count."

The sunlight receded and lost its silver brilliance. Her body went taut, and color dropped out of her face, leaving it a still white. Her lips moved into the shape of words but made no sound.

"Adios, ma'am." Hutchins touched his hat and strode across the yard toward his waiting pony.

CHAPTER THREE

Rendezvous at the Silver Peak

WHEN Ginnie reached River City, her eyes were deeply serene and her coral red mouth was softly curved. She could see Vince Taber, drop in on him casually, without the slightest embarrassment to him or herself. She had made that possible by insisting that his kiss needed no explanation, that it was an unimportant incident which they would both forget—almost.

Leaving her pony at the hitchrack in front of the sheriff's office, she went lightly, triumphantly, up the two shallow steps. Opening the door, she called: "Hello, Vince!"

But she halted at once. The room was crowded with men. Unwashed, unshaven men in tattered, dirty clothes, huddled together like driven animals. Flanking them were two armed deputies.

"Ginnie!" Taber shot to his feet. "Come in, come in!"

She hesitated. "Should I?"

"Certainly." Light swept to the surface of his eyes. "This business will be finished in another minute. Sit right here beside me." He pulled another chair up to the desk.

She tilted her face and smiled at him while her pulses took up the rhythm of the triumphant song surging through her.

"I'll be right with you," he said, and turned to confront the men guarded by the deputies.

"Listen carefully to what I'm going to say," he told them. "There are two wagons waiting in the alley behind the jail. You'll be put into those wagons and driven to a point five miles from River City. My deputies will ride beside the wagons to be sure you don't make mistakes. When you get out, you're to keep on traveling until you're over the county line. If any of you try to come back, you'll be sent to the territorial prison."

"You can't just dump us!" a gaunt, gray-haired man protested. "Afoot, without water—"

"Get them started," Taber snapped, and the two lawmen began to herd the men, at gun-point, toward the door.

"We're hungry. Even an animal would be fed before it was turned out—" The voice cut off abruptly as the deputies prodded the last shambling figure from the office and closed the door.

"More gold tramps?" Ginnie asked.

Vince Taber nodded. "River City's been filling up with them for several days. They're the breed who prefer towns, where it's usually easier to steal or beg. From now on, we're going to round them up every day and give 'em the choice of leaving or being sentenced to the territorial penitentiary."

"Those on the range should be handled the same way!"

His face darkened and intensity glowed darkly behind it. "They'll soon be taken care of. They've been a harder problem, one we're finally going to answer with toughness. The range squatters are smart and tricky. Most of them settled down on what they call 'public land'. They've put up the argument that nobody has authority to chase 'em off such land and they talk loud and fast about their 'rights' as Americans. But tonight will see the whole thing settled."

"Tonight?"

He nodded again, his fierce darkness a palpable force. "The County Rancher's Association—which was organized a couple of weeks ago, as your father probably told you—is meeting in the schoolhouse tonight. The meeting is to arrange for every outfit in Singing River to work together. We'll make things too hot for the squatters to stay—if necessary, drive 'em out with lead. Regardless of the laws concerning public lands, what can the government do if every cattleman in the district decides to make his own laws? They can't arrest the entire county."

"I see." A disturbing thought crossed her mind. Jake Hutchins, with his strange, tawny eyes, had demanded proof that the gold squatters had actually committed the crimes charged to them. Ignoring the sudden uneasiness, she said. "Yes, that sounds like the only answer." Then she added quickly, her voice lifting to gaiety: "Let's forget the whole, miserable situation for a little while and have dinner. It's past noon."

"Wish I could." His glance caught in the blue depths of her eyes. "I'm expecting—someone in less than half an hour. But," he added hastily, "maybe I can fix it anyhow."

"Try, won't you? I'd like to go to the Silver Peak."

"Then we will!" he said with sudden decision. He crossed over to the door that opened into the jail and called: "Whitey!"

The jailer, an elderly man with a bunch of cell keys ringed to his belt, shuffled forward.

Taber said: "I've got to go out awhile, but I'm expecting a caller. Explain to her that I'll be back as soon as possible."

"All right," Whitey grumbled. "Suppose something important comes up?"

Taber hesitated. "In that case, I'll be at the Silver Peak."

Ginnie's pulses lifted into a drumming, triumphant tatoo. He had said: "Explain to *her.*" The caller he was expecting was Mary Wilson. And he was willing to let her wait.

TEN minutes later, as they were entering the restaurant, Ginnie looked up at Vince Taber with a smile. "I wanted to come here," she explained, "because we won't have to be stared at. It's the only place in town that offers any privacy." Without waiting for an answer, she started through the big, front dining room, toward the dimly lit booths at the rear.

A waiter padded after them and took their order. When he had gone, Ginnie regarded Vince across the narrow table, her blue eyes deep with excitement, her bright lips curving. "Now we can really talk. There's no one to listen or watch us. Nice, isn't it?"

Taber grinned. "You sound like a little kid who thinks it's fun just to be alive."

Ginnie's black lashes spread apart. "Well, isn't it? Don't you find it that way?"

"Not quite." His face darkened. "There are always too many wrong people getting in the way and spoiling things. Too many of the breed that— But let's forget it."

"I'm sorry, Vince." She touched his hand quickly, gently. "I should have realized your job would affect you that way because you're *you.* You hate law-breakers."

The darkness behind his face intensified. "Who can help hating them? Not only criminals but the stupid, shiftless hombres

who make things tough for decent people."

Her hand tightened on his. "I know," she murmured. "Weaklings are as despicable as outlaws, especially to a man like you. One born with strength and courage and—well, all the qualities a man should have."

Light flickered into his eyes and glinted whitely along his glance. "Ginnie, do you believe that—is that the way you think of me?"

"Yes." She whispered the words through her silken lips. "There's no weakness, no uncertainty in you."

He leaned forward. "You're—kind of amazing, Ginnie. So pretty—and so understanding . . ."

"Am I?" Her lips remained a little apart. Waiting, expectant.

Taber's hand closed on her slim arms, and then he bent and kissed her. Darkness surged against Ginnie, driving her pulses into a drumming tattoo. The leashed force in him was stirring, struggling, seeking escape from the shadows in which it was imprisoned.

His mouth left hers slowly, and her swift whisper was a faint cry. "Vince, Vince! I thought—I don't know what. But now—I'm becoming a little afraid."

He straightened sharply. "That's my fault. I've let things get mixed up—"

He broke off as the waiter arrived. As soon as they had been served, Ginnie said: "No more talking about us for now. We're going to eat our dinner and enjoy it. Being too serious can ruin a lot of things."

"Meaning what?" he asked.

"Just what I said." Laughter threaded through her voice. "This—" indicating him, the dimly lit booth, the fact that they were together— "is something I don't want to spoil." She looked away as if to hide her thoughts, and her glance fastened on the front of the restaurant.

The door had opened and a girl was entering. Mary Wilson! With her was a thin, shabbily dressed woman. They paused uncertainly, obviously searching for someone, and finally started through the dining room toward the booths at the rear.

Ginnie turned back to Vince Taber and smiled at him. "It was wonderful of you to bring me here," she said, in a tone that carried across the room. "I'm enjoying every minute."

"Vince." Mary Wilson was standing before their table, her dark eyes looking too large for her face. She was a slim, black-haired girl with richly tanned skin and a full, sensitive mouth. In her faded cotton dress she looked as fresh and wholesome as sunlight.

Vince Taber sprang up so swiftly that the table almost overturned. "Mary! How did you find me? Or did you just happen to drop into the Silver Peak?"

"No. I wanted to see you right away, so Whitey told me where I could find you." Her glance touched Ginnie and she nodded in brief, silent greeting.

"Hello!" Ginnie lilted, her smile brilliant with welcome. "This is luck. Sit down and join us, won't you?"

"Thanks, but I haven't time." Mary drew the tall, thin young woman forward. "Vince, this is Rose Sadler."

TABER'S cordial smile faded. Rose Sadler's face was strained and her eyes desperate. Her worn, shapeless dress had obviously been made for a much larger person. Her shoes were broken, the cracked leather gray with age. There could be no doubt that she was one of the gold squatters.

Sadler. The name echoed irritatingly through Ginnie's mind. She had heard it before. . . . Of course. That was the name of the young kid she had discharged. Bill Sadler.

"Vince," Mary Wilson said. "Fred Dickson needs a clerk for his general store. He wants a woman clerk this time, to make shopping easier for his women customers. Rose applied for the job, but when Fred

discovered her family had been prospectors, he wouldn't hire her. He said you'd made everyone in town promise not to give work to anyone from California."

"Yes." The darkness behind his face grew. "I did. And I expect the promises to be kept. You know what Singing River's up against."

"This is different, Vince. She has to have work."

His eyes were unlighted bits of gray stone. "Mary, you know so many prospectors are coming in that there's just one thing to be considered: how to save ourselves."

"Won't you listen? She needs work so badly! Not only for herself but for her family. Her parents are ill and there's a little brother—"

"No." He shook his head. His glance fixed on Rose Sadler and fierce intensity within him was a coldly driving wind. "There'll be no exceptions."

Rose Sadler stared at him a moment with her desperate eyes but did not speak. Instead, she turned and hurried from the restaurant."

"Vince, what's got into you?" Mary Wilson's hands lifted as if to touch and claim him. "You're not this hard! That girl has a right to live."

"Sure. In some other place."

"Something has changed you." Her voice was low and and unsteady. "Something that keeps me from reaching you."

He moved uncomfortably, and light flickered in his eyes. "I haven't changed at all," he said. "I felt the same way when the first bunch of gold tramps showed up. I knew, then, what was going to happen. Do you like what they've done to this range?"

"No, but Rose Sadler—" Mary stopped. "If we were alone, I could make you understand." She looked directly at Ginnie. "I simply have to talk to Vince—alone."

He straightened and a dark flush spread along his jaws. Before he could speak, Ginnie interrupted.

"No, please—I'll leave," she murmured. "That's what you want, isn't it, Mary?"

"No!" Taber snapped. "Neither of us will leave until we've finished dinner."

She smiled at him as she pushed back her chair. "It'll be better, easier for you." Her eyes were deep with understanding, with remembrance and promise. "But I'll be waiting to hear all about the rancher's meeting." She added, slowly, making each word a signal: "It'll probably be over early, won't it?"

"Yes." His voice acknowledged her message. "Very early."

"Then good-by. I'll see you both soon." She turned away, moving buoyantly, the sharp, sweet taste of triumph in her mouth.

Mary Wilson had already lost Vince Taber. She had followed him and, finding him with another girl, had not only made a scene but demanded that the other girl leave. She had made Vince feel ridiculous, had wounded his masculine pride. Yes, she had lost him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Lady and the Sheriff

GINNIE crossed the flatlands at a canter. When she reached the high range above, she pulled in to breathe her pony. A high, white sky, thin, sharp sunlight, rich grassland cut by the swift, gleaming water of High River. Beautiful country. . . .

Her glance halted, became fixed. A shack had been erected near the river fork. A miserable shanty of logs and canvas. More gold tramps. Another family of squatters. And they had settled down on one of the best parts of the range!

Her eyes became the smoking blue. She was about to spur her pony forward when she caught the sound of moving wheels and the chunk of hoofs. A wagon was cutting across the open range toward the shack. The driver was standing, cracking his whip

above the team. A second man followed the wagon on horseback. A tall, wide-shouldered man who, even in the saddle, had an air of alertness, of readiness. Jake Hutchins!

As the wagon neared the river fork, the door of the shack opened and a woman and child emerged. The driver called and the woman waved excitedly. Another child rushed from the shack, and finally a gaunt, unshaven man appeared.

The wagon halted. Jake Hutchins also reined in and dismounted. He and the driver began to unload the wagon. Obviously, the boxes and packages contained supplies. Food. Hutchins was feeding the squatters, helping them, encouraging them to remain in Singing River!

Ginnie sent her pony into a gallop toward the shack. "Wait a minute!" she called, bringing her mount to a sliding, skidding halt. "What is this? Who's camping here? Who built that—that place?"

The woman stared at her silently. Stared with eyes as desperate as Rose Sadler's had been.

The gaunt, unshaven man turned uncertainly. "Well, now, ma'am, we—"

Hutchins, who was unloading a barrel of flour, put it down carefully, straightened and swung around. "Never mind. I'll explain." His eyes were chill golden knives. "This is government land, Miss Cameron. Unless the government orders these folks off, they've got a right to stay here."

"That's not true! This is cattle country, and this land, this range, is meant for grazing. For the stock of legitimate, established ranches. It's not a camping ground for gold tramps!"

Jake Hutchins' face became even more harshly angular. He stepped toward her. "So you're taking it on yourself to make legal decisions?" he demanded, his words striking at her like bits of metal. "You're administering the law?"

"No, not alone. I'm just one of the people of Singing River who's deciding. Everyone in the county is ready to protect his rights against these squatters. That's what counts and—"

His voice cut harshly through hers: "You haven't got the rest of the county with you. Until you have, there's nothing you can do. You'd better move on, ma'am. Sorry we're too busy to argue."

Hot scarlet scorched into her cheeks as she stared at him, anger beginning to pulse through her brain. He, a stranger, the new owner of a small, unimportant spread, was ordering her—Regina Cameron—away from a squatter's shack. Actually ordering her off Singing River Range!

Choking with anger, she wheeled her horse and started back to the trail. This was something that would be taken up at the rancher's meeting that night. Her father would demand action.

She pulled her horse down to a walk, but the pulsing anger was still a ragged beat flailing through her entire body. Jake Hutchins' golden eyes had held . . . She cut the thought off. There had been something almost savage about him. Maybe he had some special reason for helping and encouraging the squatters. Maybe he hoped to gain by it. Possibly thought it would give him a chance to grab some of what the gold tramps so defiantly called public land.

The slap of hoofs sounded from somewhere behind her. Hutchins had probably finished unloading the food and was leaving. She rode around the curve of Little Bend, into the shade created by tall pine-scrub lining the trail. The hoofs were still ringing clearly. Coming closer. She reined in as Jake Hutchins' horse shot around the bend.

HE PULLED to a sharp stop. "Ginnie—Miss Cameron—I hoped I could catch up with you."

"Why?"

"Because I shouldn't have been so—rude a few minutes ago. Naturally, you can't understand or sympathize with the squatters.

But if you'd try to understand that they're desperate, hungry—"

"That's not the responsibility of the people of Singing River. They weren't asked to come here."

"Maybe." He maneuvered his pony closer and his glance searched her face. "But they're here. They need help."

"Why?"

"Because they're human beings and they're in trouble."

"So you believe the range should take care of every stupid, shiftless person in the country?"

"No, but there are times—" He broke off and the flame flickered up from the depths of his eyes. "Won't you realize we simply can't let people starve? Watch children suffer from hunger?"

"If they're starving, it's their own fault. They thought of nothing but rushing across the continent to find gold—trying to get rich without working. They should have thought of their children then."

"But—" He stopped again, his mouth hardening, losing all its youth. "I should have realized you're not capable of considering anyone or anything except yourself," he said. "You're not even able to understand other human beings. Maybe because part of you died a long time ago. The important part. And it's too bad, because you could have been so wonderful. Could have been the woman any man would trade the world for."

His voice had lowered and warmed. Had brushed against her senses, stirred them. The sunlight seemed to thrust, suddenly, across the shade and close around her, dazzling her. He was bending toward her, and she could see the grain of his copperytinged skin, the line of his mouth. There was power in him; a different kind of power. She was uneasily conscious of it, conscious of the rhythmic life-pulse in his body.

You could have been the woman any man would trade the world for. . . . She had to end this, to get away from him so that she could think clearly again.

She lifted the reins, but his hand closed on her wrist. He leaned over and his mouth took hers swiftly, almost roughly.

The sunlight became sharper and warmer, changed into golden flame. Wild, flaring golden flame such as she had seen in the depths of his eyes. There was a dizzying pounding in her senses—and paradoxically, a sudden soaring sensation. A light, winged freedom, a new aliveness. . . .

"Ginnie." The sound of her name came from a great distance. Her eyes opened slowly. She was in Jake Hutchins arms; his face was close, his mouth near her own, his breath on her lips. "You are real," he murmured. "You can be."

She straightened. This was the stranger who had said she had the disposition of a rattler, who had ordered her away from the squatters' shack!

"Let me go!"

The amber glance pushed at the surface of her eyes, and his mouth thinned. But he did not speak. Instead he silently let her go.

Ginnie wheeled her pony and sent him up-trail, toward the Half Moon, at top speed.

THAT night, after supper, Ginnie watched her father ride away from the ranch house and waved at him as he turned through the gates. He was going to the Ranchers Association meeting, and at the meeting, he would give a detailed account of what had happened near High River forks. There would be action now. He had promised that.

Her mother was in the living room, reading, but when Ginnie came in she put down her book and started out.

"Am I imagining things?" the girl asked lightly. "Or are you avoiding me?"

Mrs. Cameron paused. "It's not imagination. I am."

"Oh . . ." Warmth lifted into her cheeks as she met the older woman's eyes. "You're

not still worrying about Mary Wilson?"

"Mrs. Ormelee drove over to see me this afternoon to tell me about what happened in town. Mary found you and Vince Taber having dinner at the Silver Peak."

"Yes, she did. Does Mrs. Ormelee consider that scandalous?"

"After what I said this morning—but I can see it's no use talking to you. Excuse me, please." And Mrs. Cameron quietly left the room.

Ginnie went to one of the windows, looked out at the yard, paced into the hall and through the door to the veranda. Her mother wasn't fair. No one could order another person to stop being in love. Besides, nothing could be changed now. Mary Wilson, herself, had taken care of that.

Ginnie was trying to concentrate on a book when she heard hoofs slap into the yard. Yes, they were coming toward the house. Vince.

She met him at the door, both hands going out to him. "I'm glad you came," she said. "I must tell you how sorry I am about today—about what happened in the restaurant. If I caused any unpleasantness, I'll never forgive myself."

A flush moved along his jaws. "You certainly did not. If there was any unpleasantness, it wasn't your fault."

"I'm glad. But, come in." She led the way into the living room, insisted on his settling into the deep, comfortable sofa, adjusted the lamp and then sat down beside him. "Tell me about the meeting."

"It was short and sweet. The ranchers agreed that every squatter is to be told to move on within three days. Any new ones that show up are to be run off immediately. If any of them refuse, the ranchers will use force. All the force needed."

"I expected they'd decide on something of the sort," Ginnie murmured. "Singing River has to be free of those squatters. . . ." Her voice slowed. The eyes of the woman standing before the log and canvas shack had looked so hopeless. Rose Sadler's face had been drawn and old, although she was young. As young as Ginnie.

"We *will* be rid of them now," Vince Taber agreed, and his dark face glowed. "But I want to talk about—today. It was embarrassing for you, and you were so nice, so fine. Mary shouldn't have brought that girl there. She shouldn't have followed me to the restaurant."

"Let's forget it." Her lips curved into brilliance. Into vitally sheened, coral warmth.

"It can't be entirely forgotten. Mary and I—"

"No!" Ginnie put her hands over her ears and laughed softly. "When you're with one girl, you should never spend your time talking of *another.*" She took her hands away from her ears and added: "Unless I'm not interesting enough to make you forget Mary."

Light flickered into his gray eyes. "You? You're—too interesting. Ginnie, I can't get you out of my mind."

"Then why try?" Her face tilted until her mouth was directly below his. Inviting, waiting.

In the second before his lips pressed down on hers, she glimpsed the intensity behind his face, the suddenly growing darkness. His arms went around her and her pulses were a drumming tattoo. A triumphant song.

Finally, she stirred away from him. "Maybe I shouldn't have done that. Maybe it's not right." But she swayed close again, her lashes veiling her eyes.

His arms tightened into fierceness. He kissed her again and the caress was also fierce. A sharp, sweet taste was in her mouth. The taste of triumph. But she freed herself. "Vince I—I don't know what to say. I told you I was—afraid."

"What's there to be afraid of?"

"I don't know. Perhaps nothing. This has happened so quickly, so unexpectedly, I'm confused. I need time to think."

"Aren't you sure? Ginnie—"

"Maybe I am. I'll have to find out. When we're together, it's hard to think straight."

"Do you mean you want me to go?"

"Just for a little while. Just until tomorrow."

"All right." He reached for her hands, caught them between his own. "By tomorrow I'll have everything cleared up, too. Straightened out."

"Good." Her voice was low and unsteady. "Then go quickly. "Don't say goodby because we'll just be—waiting for a little while."

His grip on her hands tightened briefly. Then he went out swiftly, not even glancing back as he closed the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bitter Triumph

GINNIE listened to the sound of his pony moving across the yard, echoing more faintly from the wagon road. Then a rich, chuckling laugh swept up from her throat. Yes, she had won. Completely, finally.

She sprang to her feet exuberantly. She couldn't stay indoors now. She had to be outside, under the sky, with the night around her!

The front door knocker banged sharply. Banged again. She hesitated, but when neither the housekeeper nor her mother appeared, she went to answer.

It was Mary Wilson! Mary, her body looking rigidly erect, her dark eyes stormy. She stepped into the hall.

"I know I shouldn't do this," she said jerkily, "but I can't help myself. I asked Vince to come to see me tonight, but he mentioned the meeting and other reasons that made it impossible. I knew he wanted to see you so I waited on the trail. I saw him come here and watched him leave."

Ginnie tilted her chin. "Well? Since you know he was here, what is there to say?"

Mary's tanned face whitened. "This: I love Vince. Love him enough to forget my pride and beg for him. He loved me until you became interested in him. He still loves me. You've just dazzled him. You're beautiful and rich and all the rest of it. I can't compete with you on your own grounds."

"Are you asking me to stop seeing him? To send him back to you?"

The dark girl's face became even whiter and her eyes dulled with sick hurt. "Yes."

Ginnie's black lashes spread apart. "You amaze me, Mary. I can't send any man back to another girl. That's up to the man."

"Then you won't? You intend to go on seeing him?"

"I've tried to explain—"

"Never mind," Mary Wilson broke in. "I shouldn't have come here. I knew you wouldn't give anyone a fair chance." She turned stiffly to the door.

"Wait—" Ginnie cried, but the other girl had already gone, and by the time Ginnie reached the veranda, Mary's horse was disappearing into the darkness.

Frowning, Ginnie started to close the door, then stopped as a bootheel scraped the earth. The darkness stirred and shaped into the outlines of a man. A tall man who stepped into the shaft of light and looked down at her with chill, golden flame in his eyes. Jake Hutchins.

"Well!" Her caught breath broke, suddenly, through her lips. "The Half Moon's having a lot of unexpected callers tonight."

He nodded. "I followed Mary Wilson here."

Ginnie tried to laugh but her throat had closed. Fear was touching her. A new kind of fear that this golden-eyed, somehow savage, stranger had created.

"And," she said, "Mary followed—someone else."

"Yes. Vince Taber. I was coming back from the rancher's meeting—after they practically threw me out—and noticed a pony half-hidden in the brush beside the trail. I got down for a look and discovered

Mary Wilson. A minute later, I knew why she was there. Vince Taber rode by heading for the Half Moon."

"So you decided to drop in, too?"

"I figured we might have a talk."

"Really?" The quality of laughter finally touched her words. "Then come in."

"I'd rather not. Can't we do our talking out here?"

She hesitated, aware of the deep flame lifting from the depths of his eyes, the hard lustre of his copper-tinged skin, the savage power in him. "If you wish." She would leave the door open, so that escape would be swift and easy.

"Thanks. I want to talk to you about Mary Wilson. She's fine and strong. And good. I could tell you a lot more that people say about her, but that's enough. She's in love with Vince Taber. She's the one-man type, and if she loses him she may not get over it."

Ginnie stared through the gloom, trying to see his face. "You came to tell me about Mary. You don't seem to care about—" She broke off sharply.

"About you?" His voice drove at her. He laughed thinly. "Not at all. If Vince Taber thinks he loves you, that unimportant. It's also unimportant if you think you love him. You won't be damaged or even hurt if you lose him. Nothing could do that to you. You can't feel deeply enough."

"Yet you expect me to feel enough pity for Mary to send him back to her?"

"No, I don't. Not really." His voice had changed again and lost its harsh edge. "I guess I just hoped. Since I've got your answer, I'll let it go at that. Good night."

"Wait." She whirled toward him. "I don't understand. Today you kissed me, made love to me. Yet tonight you—"

"Yes." He broke in. "Tonight, I'm quite willing for you to be interested in another man. In any other man. Kissing a girl's not important. Sometimes it means nothing."

She strained, now, to see his eyes, to discern the shape of his mouth. "Then when you kissed me it was meaningless? Just one of those things?"

"Are you really that surprised?" he asked. "Haven't you ever kissed and forgotten? Like this?"

His hands touched her, closed on her arms and then slid up to her shoulders. His arms caught her, pulled her against him. His kiss crushed her lips, spread wild golden flame over her mouth and started a new rhythm in her senses.

He released her. Words tumbled against her lips but before she could speak, his boot-heels scraped against the ground. He was deliberately walking away from her. . . .

GINNIE lay tossing in her bed, watching the night pressing against the windows of her bedroom. She would sleep soon. She must. But she kept tossing, even more restlessly, against her pillows. She had not heard from Vince for more than twenty-four hours. Not since he had left the Half Moon ranch house with her promise of "tomorrow" in his ears. Why hadn't he returned? If anything had happened to him, she would have heard.

Had Mary seen him? Had she seen Jake Hutchins? Strange that Jake had been so concerned for her, so interested in protecting her.

Ginnie thrust the hot pillow away and sat up. She thought she heard a persistent, growing noise. Yes. Running hoofs. She slid her feet to the floor as a gun roared from the wagon road. Barked quickly again and again.

Three swift shots meant trouble. Range trouble.

Even as she ran to the window, the house came to life. Doors opened and closed; lights flared through the windows; her father's voice called orders.

The running hoofs were in the yard, nearing the house. She lit one of the oil-lamps, waited impatiently for the flame to glow, and then hurriedly began to dress. Five minutes later, wearing saddle clothes,

she was hurrying through the hall toward the sound of her father's snapping voice.

"What's happened?" She stepped through the door to his side.

"A shooting—maybe a killing. One of the Half Moon outfit, too. I gave the men orders to get firm with the squatters. Told them to move around and warn any gold tramps they found. A couple of the boys ran into a family of them on Split Creek. The squatters were skinning a steer. The men couldn't make out the brand, but they knew it had been stolen. They ordered the squatters to hand over the beef and clear off the range right that minute. One of the squatters pulled a gun and shot him."

"Who? Which one of the men?"

"Sid Randall. He's been with the Half Moon for five years. The squatter who shot him is named Sadler."

Sadler. Uneasiness flicked at Ginnie. "What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

"I'm taking the men to Split Creek where the boys are holding Sadler."

"Taking all of them just to get Sadler to jail?"

"No." Bob Cameron's voice cracked. "He won't need jail or a cell or a trial. After tonight, every squatter in Singing River will clear out—run for his life."

"But—"

"Never mind. Go back to bed and forget about it."

Horses were clattering across the yard from the corrals. One of the riders led up a saddled pony, and Cameron swung up.

He won't need jail or a cell or a trial. That meant . . . She thrust her own knowledge away from her and started to run. Ran at top speed until she reached the corrals. When she brought out a pony, her hands were shaking and it took her a long time to saddle. Finally, she was up and racing from the yard, turning up trail toward Split Creek.

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Long before she reached the creek, she saw the sky begin to glow. Pinkish light struck against it and she smelled smoke. Not a range fire, though. Something else.

She dug in her heels and turned off the trail to cut across the open range. Riding over the final slope, she caught a stark, terrible glimpse of the scene below. A huge bonfire was spreading light over the grass, over the dark outline of a tree. A rope hung from the tree and men were huddled below.

"Dad!"

Her shrill cry split the night. The group of men shifted. Her father broke through them into view.

She prodded her pony again. "Dad—" Other horses were charging down on Split Creek Range. A dozen of them. And in the saddles were armed men. The first rider lifted a long gun and squeezed down.

A bullet spat through the branches of the tree, over the heads of the milling figures below. Bob Cameron ran for his horse and wheeled, gun leveling. But the charging riders swept into the lighted space, crowding back the Half Moon outfit.

Ginnie checked her pony's speed. Heading the new arrivals was Jake Hutchins.

IT WAS he who had shot over the heads of the Half Moon riders. And now, as those with him crowded between the bound, sagging figure and the men determined upon lynching, he called:

"There'll be no hanging! Get back, Cameron. Order your outfit back."

"Who says so? Who've you got with you? A bunch of squatters?"

"Some of them are. They're on my ponies and using my guns."

"Then we'll blow 'em right off."

"Dad!" Ginnie drew in and hurriedly dropped to the ground. "You can't do this! You can't lynch a man!"

He stared at her, his mouth open, his jaw loose. "Ginnie! Where'd you come from? What're you talking about? Get out of here."

"No." She turned and walked toward Jake Hutchins. Walked slowly and deliberately. Finally she turned and faced Cameron and the Half Moon outfit. "I'm in this now. I'll fight, too. Against you."

"Ginnie, have you gone crazy?"

"No. Order the boys to leave. Right now. I'll see that Sadler is turned over to the sheriff."

Her father looked uncertainly at his riders. Finally, slowly, he holstered his gun. "I think you mean it. But what do you figure to do about that hombre's crime? If Sid Randall dies—"

"I told you he'd be turned over to the sheriff. Please leave before something happens."

Cameron wheeled, snapped brief orders and started south. The outfit rode after him. And suddenly Ginnie crumpled, her body shaken with hysterical sobs.

Someone lifted her from the ground. Someone with firm hands, with hard, warm arms.

"So I was right the first time!" Jake Hutchins said softly. "You *are* real, Ginnie. Real and wonderful."

"I—I couldn't let that happen. Even if Sadler is guilty—"

"He's not. Bill Sadler came down here tonight to visit his family. He works for me, as you know, but he wanted to see his folks. They'd been given a steer—"

"Given?"

Jake nodded. "I gave it to them. They didn't have enough to eat. They were butchering it when the Half Moon riders jumped them and began to throw lead. Bill had to defend his family and he did."

The girl shivered. "Yet they'd have hanged him, lynched him."

"Yes!" His arms tightened. "But tomorrow, the law will step in."

"But you know how Vince feels—"

"I'm not going to the sheriff. I'll notify the territorial rangers."

"Sadler will have to be jailed."

(Continued on page 111)

DYNAMITE FOR HIRE

Jud needed a bookkeeper to straighten out the Horseshoe books—and got a winsome filly to tangle up his heart.

By Darlene du Bois

"Howdy, Mr. Scott," she said. "I got your letter of acceptance."

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

JUD SCOTT glanced up briefly as Sandy, the lanky, freckle-faced Texan, sauntered into the ranch office. Then he finished making out the second of the two checks, signing his name with an angry flourish and heaving the pen into the clutter of papers, account books and unanswered letters that littered the desk.

"You look sort of clouded up," Sandy commented.

"And near ready to start rainin'," Jud retorted. "Troxell fired Hooker and Allred last night."

"Fired 'em!"

"Yeah! He got along all right with them for a year; but now, when we got less than a week to finish this roundup, he cans them. He may be an awful good cowman, as Dad figured when he put him in charge of this place, but—"

"Yeah," Sandy agreed softly. "Your dad's gone and it's up to you now."

Even Sandy's tone, with its trust and loyalty, could not lighten Jud's sense of frustrated fury. He had brought this old friend with him when he left the home ranch over on the Pecos a few days ago to find out why this Horseshoe spread was not showing a profit. So far they had found out nothing except that Brent Troxell, the foreman in charge, had the smuggest grin Jud had ever wanted to slam a fist into.

The Horseshoe record books, which Troxell had been keeping, were as jumbled and unintelligible as a collection of Chinese figures written upside down. Jud couldn't tell how many calves had been branded last spring, how many yearlings had been sold in the fall. He couldn't even find out how many cows had been on the place to start with.

Finally, in desperation, he had decided to round up the whole outfit, tally them out and enter the figures in new records set up by a professional bookkeeper. The roundup would be a man-sized job in so short a time, even with a full crew who knew the range. Now he would have only the two young cowboys he had hired day before yesterday just for this special job.

"Did you find that bookkeeper?" he asked abruptly. "That Mayberry?"

"Yeah." Sandy jerked a thumb over his shoulder but kept his glance on his cigarette.

"Well, fetch him in," Jud said impatiently.

"Hang onto your shirt tail, son," Sandy drawled. "It's a filly."

"A filly?"

"Yeah. A female."

"You picked up the wrong huckleberry," Jud stated with finality. "Here's his letter of application right here. Says he knows cows from A to over yonder, besides knowing the bookkeeping business. Signs his name Geo. A. Mayberry."

"Yeah," Sandy said again. "George *Ann* Mayberry. She said you'd hired her, so I fetched her out."

It took a full second for the enormity of the offense—plus the horrifying possibilities—to hit Jud like a hard fist right in the pit of the stomach. He bounced to his feet, kicking the chair over behind him.

"No!" he shouted. "I won't have a woman—"

The sudden opening of the door stopped him. He was caught with his right arm raised, his fist doubled ominously, and he froze in that position.

The girl who entered was not very large, but the bright plaid shirt and faded levis she wore proved that what there was of her was properly distributed. She had a freckled nose and dark curly hair, and her eyes were the bluish-green of deep water—and as beautifully serene as a mountain lake at sunset.

"You the boss?" she inquired matter of factly.

Jud jerked his hand down as if he had singed it. "Yes. No! That is—"

"You Jud Scott?"

"Yes, but—"

"Howdy, Mr. Scott." She gave him the brighest sort of a smile. "I got your letter of acceptance and was certainly grateful. Where are the books you want straightened out?"

"I've lost 'em," Jud blurted. "Look, miss, I've decided not to hire a bookkeeper."

"Wouldn't think so," she said calmly. "You'd have no use for another one."

"Another one?"

"Sure. I'm already hired, remember? Are these the records?"

As she started forward, her spurs tinkling merrily, Jud retreated around behind the desk, barked his shin on the chair he had kicked over and missed his grab for the nearest tally book.

"Wait! These are a miss, mess. I mean— Sandy!"

But Sandy had beat a strategic retreat, and Jud was strictly on his own.

JUD knew nothing about women, and he had always figured he was safer for his ignorance. Now he watched with helpless apprehension as Geo. A. Mayberry started a swift, efficient sorting of the papers scattered over the desk. When she came to her own letter of application, she tore it into several pieces and dropped the pieces into a waste basket.

"We won't need that," she remarked.

Jud woke up. "No," he said grimly, "we won't. Listen, miss. This is strictly a bachelor outfit. We haven't got any women around here, and that's just the very first part of a long, long story. I'm trying to get *out* of a mess—"

"Who's been keeping these books?" she interrupted, scanning the entries in one of them.

"Brent Troxell, but that's all right. We'll get 'em fixed up." Jud pulled in a deep breath and started over. "Listen, miss. I'm running a cow outfit, not a Ladies Aid Society. No offense, but women and work won't mix and I got work to do. I'm sorry you had your trip out here for nothin'."

Jud threw a hobble around his tongue for the simple reason that he could see he was being ignored, anyway. George was frowning over the book in her hand, turning page after page with nary a sign of approval.

"Mr. Troxell," she observed, "ought to make a pretty good sheepherder. I don't see how anybody could tell anything from this. What you need to do is start all over."

Jud exploded, his hands once more flying into the air. "That's what I'm trying to do!" he yelled. "If you'll just—"

"You bet I will," she said, closing the book and tapping it lightly against his heaving chest. "Now, you just have a care for your blood pressure, Mr. Scott. I know cows and I know books. I'll have this mess straightened out in no time."

"You know cows, do you?" Jud said, suddenly wanting to commit murder.

He flashed a glance over her, from her shiny head right on down to her small boots and Chihuahua spurs. A female bookkeeper—with spurs! She didn't even have the grace to blush at his inspection.

"All right, dammit," he said. "We're holdin' a roundup and we're shorthanded. You got your own riggin'?"

"Yessir."

"Well, come out and throw it on a bronc."

"Yessir!"

Jud grabbed his hat off a wall peg, slammed it down on his head and stalked out through the house toward the back door. He was acutely aware of the cheerful tinkle of those Chihuahua spurs right behind him.

Sandy, Troxell and the two young cowboys had their horses already saddled and were hunkered in the shade of the bunkhouse, smoking. Troxell came to his feet in a smooth glide as he saw the girl behind Jud, and a quick smile wreathed his handsome features.

"Who's this?" he asked.

"This," Jud snapped, "is George!"

As he jerked the rope off his saddle, he was aware that Troxell's eyes were swarming over the girl like ants over a pitcher of syrup; and Jud ground his teeth in helpless rage. That finished it. Now Brent Troxell wouldn't be able to see a cow if he fell over it.

Sandy was holding the corral bars when Jud led out the little bay he had roped.

"She ridin' with us?" the Texan asked in consternation.

"She is," Jud said. "How in hell do you go about firin' a lady that don't want to be fired?"

Sandy squinted at Jud in anxiety for a moment but finally nodded. "Make her sick of the job, I reckon," he drawled. "Here, I'll saddle that cayuse."

Geo. A. Mayberry, however, saddled her own cayuse, throwing the heavy stock saddle deftly into place and jerking up the two cinches before either Sandy or Troxell could get untracked to help her. Jud didn't offer to help. He just climbed on the big brown that Sandy had saddled for him and pulled out toward the west end of the ranch.

He wished now that he had waited until next month to come, as he had originally planned. Troxell said he'd planned to have all the cattle rounded up and thrown down onto the flat by that time, where they could be easily inspected. Now, the job would have to be done hurriedly since Jud and Sandy had to be back at the home ranch by the end of the week to receive a shipment of Mexican steers.

The ridged, mesquite-dotted desert range was in excellent condition. Already it was greening up under spring rains, and water was plentiful. The cattle Jud had seen were all fat, and the calf crop seemed satisfactorily heavy. In fact, everything seemed satisfactory—except that during the past year the ranch had barely made expenses.

Jud still felt like a bronc with a burr in his saddle blanket as he pulled up on the long ridge above Mesquite Tank. "We'll throw the cattle into the Canyon Well and put them through the fence there," he said. "When we get them all out on the flat, we'll hold one big gather and tally them out. Troxell, you and the two boys swing back and work all those little canyons east of here."

He waited until Troxell and the two young cowboys had jogged off before turning his cool glance to George Ann. She was watching him sober-faced, waiting for instructions. Jud felt an almost irresistible desire to send her to work the brushy, tangled canyon farther west, but his natural decency restrained him.

"The well's about four miles straight down off the end of this ridge," he told her. "There's a tank and some corrals down here just a little ways that'll probably have some cattle around 'em. Ride the ridge but keep your eyes peeled in the canyons on both sides."

"Yessir," George said.

That way she had of saying "Yessir" was more of a challenge than a sign of respect, and Jud grunted incoherently under his breath as he and Sandy reined away toward the west. Almost immediately they jumped a big bunch of cattle that took off like stampeding antelope toward the rugged mountain to the north.

IT WAS wild fast work getting them turned back down country, and from there on to the well Jud had no chance to think. It was a case of ride fast and watch every little canyon to keep the cattle from doubling back toward the mountain and escape.

Jud was the last one in to the well, where several hundred cattle were being held against the fence for a moment to quiet them. Then one of the boys slipped around them to open the gate.

Putting spooky cattle through a gate was always tricky business but Jud waved his riders back, letting the old cows find the gate for themselves and dart through it, bent once more on escape. Gradually the riders crowded in, shoving stragglers into the stream pouring through the opening.

The job was almost done, with the last half dozen yearlings bucking and dodging through the gate, when George suddenly jumped her horse ahead, cutting off the last animal as neatly as Jud had ever seen

it done. The steer whirled and spilled back up the country as if the devil himself were on his trail.

Jud had the animal roped within a quarter of a mile, but that did not appreciably cool his boiling blood stream; and when the steer flopped over into the dust and refused to get up, Jud blew a fuse. He was circling the critter, flicking his rope and telling the animal alternately about his ancestors and about women when a breathless voice cut into his monologue.

"I'll tail him up."

Jud looked up, startled, to find George Ann already on the ground, heading for the steer, her face as red as an overripe tomato. She didn't look up at him, but her obvious embarrassment stung him to fresh anger. A girl had no right to slip up on a man that way when he was provoked.

Jud straightened his rope, made his horse lean into and, when the girl put a couple of twists in the steer's tail, they went on through the gate as if they'd been catapulted. Sandy heeled the critter to remove the head rope.

As Jud headed back for the gate, still boiling, he saw that Troxell was on the ground, waiting to close the gate, while George sat her horse just beyond, concentrating studiously on her saddle horn. Jud laid his coil of rope carefully over the fork of his saddle and bent a hard gaze on Troxell.

"What the hell were you fellas doing last year besides drawing wages?" he asked.

"What do you mean by that?" Troxell asked quickly.

"You told me that everything was branded."

"I missed a few that were up on the mountain."

"A few!" Jud exploded. "There were at least twenty head in this bunch right here that didn't have a mark on 'em. Yearlings, at that! And at least fifty branded yearlings. Didn't you sell anything last fall?"

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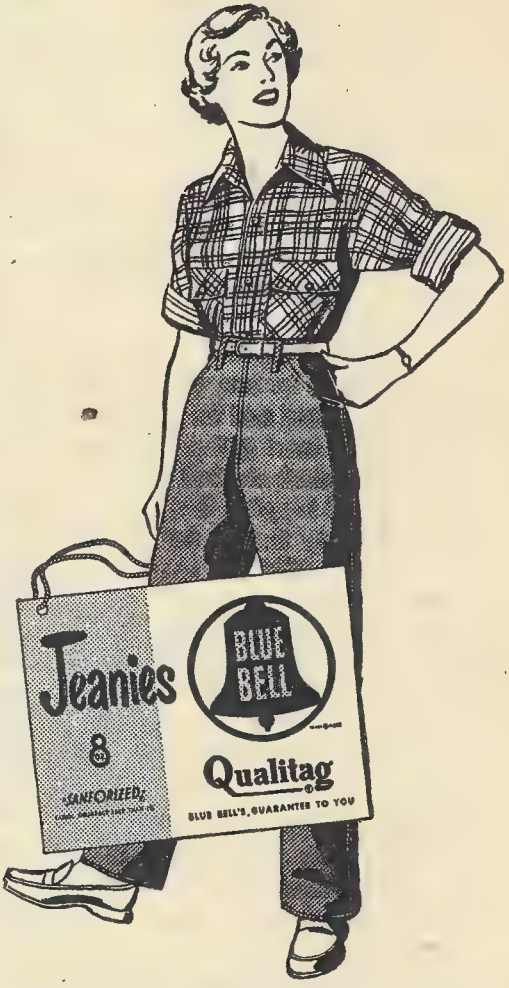

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"I told you I held a few back."

"A few?" Jud repeated again.

"Well, I held most of 'em back," Troxell admitted, growing sullen. "The market ought to be better this year."

"The market wasn't that bad last year," Jud told him flatly. "No wonder this place isn't making money. Seventy yearlings in this little bunch, and twenty of 'em just sitting around waiting for a rustler to pick 'em up."

"We haven't lost any," Troxell retorted. "There hasn't been a rustler in this country for four years. Every yearling that hasn't been sold is right here on the ranch. It's all there in the record books."

"The record books!" Jud's furious yell snapped off as he saw George Ann wheel her horse around and ram home the spurs, heading at a hard gallop back toward the ridge down which she had come.

Jud turned his glare back on Troxell but found suddenly that he felt more ashamed than angry. Without another word he touched spurs to his horse and led off at an angle that would bring them to the base of the mountain about half way between the ranch and the spot where they had started this drive. It was only a little after noon, and they could work that country easily before dark.

Jud's uneasy thoughts, however, would not stay on this second drive. As they rode back up the country, his glance kept straying toward the west, searching the ridges for sight of a rider on a small bay horse. Where Geo. A. Mayberry thought she was going he had no idea, but he couldn't doubt the reason for her taking off. She had guessed, correctly, that his impotent anger at her had been responsible for his sudden blow-off at Troxell.

Finally Jud's clamoring conscience would no longer be denied. He said to Sandy, "You boys can handle this. Reckon I better go hunt up that hot-headed little whipper-snapper before she gets plumb lost in the hills."

Jud rode straight to the heavy corral built around Mesquite Tank and there pulled up, staring at the ground and not liking what he saw one little bit. A good-sized herd of cattle had been driven out of the pen sometime during the past few hours, headed for the brushy sanctuary of the mountain. He and Sandy had undoubtedly ridden over that broad trail this morning, but they had been too busy chasing wild cattle to see it.

George Ann had come by here this morning and had crossed the large corral to the smaller one built into one corner for the working of calves. On her return, however, she had ridden straight past the corral and gone on toward the mountain, following the tracks of the cattle.

OUT of curiosity Jud crossed to that smaller corral to see what she'd been looking for. He saw where she had dismounted in one corner and had knelt to examine a post on which were a number of marks, as if someone had been keeping tally during a branding. He also noticed the marks of her fingers in the dust where she had scraped up some of the hairs scattered over the ground and had evidently examined them too.

Jud leaned slowly over his saddle horn, staring at this scene with a vague uneasiness, with a strange feeling that something here was eluding his attention. With a feeling, also, that George Ann Mayberry knew what that something was.

"She can read sign," he told his horse, "which proves that she's seen a cow before, somewhere. Then what in the devil made her jump into that gate thataway?"

Abruptly he reined out of the corral and turned toward the mountain, spurring his horse into a lope. He passed an occasional cow and calf straggling back to water and knew that whoever had penned those cattle was now cutting his herd as opportunity afforded, until the tracks were predominantly those of yearlings.

Jud didn't need to be told that they were Horseshoe yearlings. Maybe there hadn't been a rustler in the country for four years, but all the evidence indicated that there was at least one on the prowl now. And he was being trailed by a spur-jingling bookkeeper on a little bay horse.

Jud swore feelingly. He was drawing dangerously near the mouth of Shotgun Canyon, which sloped up to a steep but passable cut over the mountains; and he was becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that he was not carrying a gun. He had started out on a roundup, not a rustler hunt. Now he had to get that girl headed off before she stumbled into a hornet's nest and got herself royally stung.

He had his eyes on the track of the little bay as he tipped off into a rocky wash, crossed the sandy bottom of it and started up the far side, his horse lunging at the steep ascent. Half way up, Jud saw a snaky shadow flit before his eyes. He ducked instinctively, but not quickly enough. A rope tightened around his chest, pinning his arms, and the next moment he was jerked out of the saddle.

The long, solid fall to the bottom of the wash knocked the wind completely out of him. Immediately, he was grabbed and thrown over on his face while his hands were lashed securely behind him. He was aware of the action, but for the moment he was far more concerned about getting air into his lungs than he was about who had roped him. He was still heaving and bleary-eyed when he was pulled to his feet and held there by a firm grip on his arm.

Gradually his sight cleared. He saw first the little bay horse haltered to a thick bush a little way up the canyon where he would have been out of sight as Jud entered the draw. On him sat a very rigid Geo. A. Mayberry, her hands tied to the saddle horn and a red bandanna tied over her mouth.

Jud swore as he wrenched against the hands that held him. Then he stopped short, staring blankly at the two men Troxell had fired, Hooker and Allred. There was nothing in their physical appearance to distinguish them from a hundred other cowboys, with their dark faces, scarred denim clothes and bowed, stiffened legs. Nothing except the sag of their gunbelts and the glint of malice in their eyes.

"You two?" Jud said thickly.

Hooker, the heavier, older of the two, laughed shortly. "You didn't think we got ourselves fired for fun, did you? We had some cattle to get out of the way of your roundup."

Allred wasn't so pleasant about it. "If you'd waited a month like you were supposed to, we'd have been ready for you; but when you come sneakin' up here early, we had to leg it. I'm gonna cut your damn throat before the day's over."

The tone of his voice left no doubt that he meant what he said, and Jud felt a chill dread as he was shoved to his horse and boosted into the saddle.

It was less than two miles up Shotgun Canyon to an old prospector's cabin; and the ride was made in silence, Hooker leading Jud's horse while Allred led George Ann's. Jud was surprised to see the stout corral that had been built against the wall of the canyon, but he was not surprised to see the animals in it.

There were at least a hundred and fifty yearlings in the enclosure, a few of which showed the Horseshoe earmark, swallow-fork in the left. Most of them, however, were as slick-eared as the day they were born. And Troxell had told him everything was branded!

Of course, it was possible the foreman had been given false reports by the men working under him, that he didn't actually know conditions on the ranch. Jud had been withholding final judgment on the man because of the fact that old John Scott had trusted him, but his explanations now were going to have to be both rapid and explicit. If Jud lived long enough to listen to them.

At the door of the crumbling rock house, he was pulled off his horse and shoved inside, still in silence. The windows had long since become mere empty holes in the stone walls, and the dirt floor was littered with rubbish of all kinds. The crude table, however, was stacked high with provisions, and the frying pans turned upside down on the battered old range proved that the place had been used recently as a camp.

At the sound of a struggle, Jud turned to see George Ann being shoved bodily into the cabin. She was barely through the door when she wrenched free of Allred's hands and whirled, one hand yanking the bandanna off her face while the other came around in a full arm swing at Allred's jaw.

"Keep your hands off me!" she blazed.

Hooker stepped between them. "Can you cook, girlie?"

"You got any strychnine for seasoning?" she shot back, and Jud could not restrain a grin at the spunk she was showing.

Hooker, however, could see no humor in it. Grabbing her arm, he spun her toward the stove and gave her a shove. "Get that fire goin' and start a meal. The boss should be here before long." He turned to Jud and motioned to one of the boxes scattered around the table. "Sit down," he ordered, "and sit still."

JUD did as he was bidden, ranging a wary eye over the table in the hope of finding something with which to rub through the rope binding his hands. He saw nothing and turned his attention to George Ann.

She was attacking the meal with the same swift efficiency with which she had earlier attacked his cluttered desk. She had the fire going, the coffee on and the biscuits mixed by the time a horse approached the cabin and stopped. The next moment Brent Troxell stepped into the room.

Jud felt no surprise, but he did feel a chilling shock at the look Troxell gave him.

"Got him, did you?" Troxell said with satisfaction. "I was hoping he'd be fool enough to follow her." Then he turned to George Ann, eyeing her like a hungry wolf eyes a sheep. "I saw you feelin' over the brand when you tailed up that steer awhile ago and figured you were onto somethin'. Think you're pretty smart, don't you, cuttin' that critter back on purpose to get a look at him?"

"Smart enough," George Ann retorted, slamming a frying pan onto the stove. "By next month you'd have had all these yearling hair-branded, wouldn't you? Jud would have been satisfied; and come fall, when the hair had grown out again, you'd have cropped off that left ear and slapped some other brand on them. That's an awful slow way to steal cattle, but I guess you skunks didn't have anything else to do!"

Jud sat up straight, staring at her in awe. He knew now what had eluded him back there at the corral. All the evidence of a branding except the ashes of a fire!

"What I'd like to know," Troxell said slowly, and he voiced Jud's own thought perfectly, "is how you got onto us so quick?"

"Because you pulled the same deal on my dad three years ago!" the girl said hotly. "I was away at school at the time, but you broke him, ruined him! I've been trailing you ever since, waiting for a chance to get even. My last name," she finished, "is Mayberry!"

"So," Troxell said softly. "Little Miss Mayberry. We'll figure out later what to do with you." His hard gaze came back to Jud. "What'll that JS outfit over on the Pecos pay for you?"

"Depends," Jud said evenly, "on how good my health is."

"Good Lord, Brent!" Hooker blurted. "You wouldn't try to hang onto him?"

"We won't need to hang onto him. They'll pay if they *think* it'll save his life. Afterward, we'll see how long it takes them to find his carcass in the bottom of that old prospect hole."

"What about the girl?" Hooker asked, with a fearful side glance at her.

"We'll keep her as a hostage till we get out of the country."

"You won't get away with this," George Ann said tightly, and Jud wished fervently that he could share her confidence.

He glanced at her, marveling at the way she was continuing her preparations for the meal as if nothing were happening.

Troxell shrugged. "Well, reckon there's no point in wastin' grub on a dead man. Stand up, Scott!"

The suddenness of it took Jud's breath. He jerked his head around, staring at Troxell and seeing his death clearly mirrored in those glinting eyes.

George Ann whispered, "Jud!"

It sounded like a hopeless little moan; but as he glanced at her, he saw the fiery brightness of her eyes. Then he saw the thin-bladed butcher knife she held in front of her, shielded by her small body from the eyes of the other men.

For a second Jud stood rigid, frozen by the thought that this would add her death to his; but the light in her eyes was not a plea. It was a command and to Jud it was irresistible. A chance at least to fight!

He looked back at Troxell and stepped away from the box, as if resigned. Then he took a long, sudden step to the side, thrusting his arms out behind him as George Ann whirled away from the table. The next instant he felt the burning bite of the knife down his back as the girl slashed desperately at the rope.

Allred yelled, startled, but Troxell's reaction was instantaneous: He reached for his gun and had it half out of the holster before Jud felt the rope give way. Then the handle of the knife was thrust into his right hand, and like a tiger he lunged.

Troxell's gun cleared leather, but Jud's left hand closed over it, shoving it aside as it exploded. His right hand came around savagely with the knife; and Troxell was arrested in mid stride, seeming suspended for a moment by an invisible cord. Even before he started to sag, Jud had wrenched the gun from his hand and whirled toward Hooker. As he did so, a bullet slammed into his ribs, spinning him around, off balance; but he fired as he was falling and saw Hooker go down.

Then another bullet plowed into the floor beside Jud's face, spraying him with dust and lint. Half blinded and choking, he rolled away, struggling to draw a bead on the dodging Allred but knowing with a cold certainty that he couldn't make it. He couldn't even see the man clearly, but he did see the heavy iron frying pan that came sailing out of nowhere to crash into Allred's skull. The man dropped like a rock, his last wild bullet spanging out the window.

The thunder of the guns hadn't died out of the air when Jud tried to gain his feet, staggered into the wall and sat down suddenly, as weak as a sick kitten. George Ann was instantly on her knees beside him.

"Jud, are you badly hurt?"

"No," Jud said. "I'm just scared."

"Oh, Jud, I—" Her lips quivered and her eyes filled with tears she tried valiantly to blink back. "I'm so sorry, Jud. I should have left this morning when you wanted me to, but I've waited so long for a crack at him. I'll get out quick, first thing when we get back to the ranch."

He squinted one eye at her. "Y'know, I got another ranch down on the Pecos. The books are all right, but I can mess 'em up awful easy."

George pulled in a quick breath and stared at him searchingly, as if wondering just how light-headed he was getting. Then she squinted one eye in return. "In that case," she said solemnly, "maybe I better stick around for awhile, huh?"

Jud grinned. It wouldn't do to mention it on the first day's acquaintance, but he had a hunch she'd be sticking around longer than that. *Quite* awhile, in fact.

HIGH-RIDIN' LADY

"Well, you've done what you said you would," he said scornfully. "Carla won't ride Black Thunder now."

Romantic Old-West Novelette

♥ By Val Gendron ♥

It took a helpless Eastern girl to teach peppery Marny that all's fair in love and war . . . if you win.

CHAPTER ONE

Blonde Trouble

FOR a split second Marny Brent watched Carla Stevens ride off on the pinto; then she angrily slapped her Stetson more firmly on her red head and spurred her sorrel mare in the direction of the small town of Rock Junction.

"Wait till Mr. Mel Roarch hears about this!" she seethed, her face coloring to match the flame of her hair. "Letting that silly tenderfoot ride Thunder!"

Marny dug her heels more sharply in her horse's sides. Mel was out of his mind, she

thought. Black Thunder was the most spirited wild horse he had ever conquered from the lush wilderness of Bear Mountain, and it would take expert handling to give him a good enough showing at the Horse Fair and Fiesta for him to win the first prize. Mel always walked away with honors with his wild horses. Why was he just begging to lose this time?

It was a hobby which paid off in high prices, for the wild broncs made excellent show horses for rodeos and fairs—that is, when Mel got through with them. Marny often wondered how he had time for everything he did. His trade was the tooling of fine leather goods, engraved boots and saddles and belts. His saddle shop was popular for miles around, and cattlemen and rodeo performers depended on Mel for their fancy leather work. He was also one of the members on the Fair Board.

She wondered how he had time for her, even.

"That is what I aim to always take time out for," he had murmured a hundred times, when he held her in his strong arms or pressed her hand in the moonlight on some hill trail. "And when we're married, darling, you're going to get so tired of me hangin' round you, you'll wish I did take time out."

What was the matter with Mel now? He had no right to let Carla ride Black Thunder when he had promised Marny. They had planned a long time for this. And Carla couldn't even sit in a saddle, let alone handle that big black stallion.

"He's crazy—he's out of his mind," she said aloud, as she turned her horse into the main street and headed for Mel's saddlery.

The dust swirled as angrily as her thoughts when she brought her horse to a stand still and slid to the ground.

Mel Roarch was as big as the outdoors, with shoulders that could throw a Brahma bull. His hair carried chestnut lights and his laughing blue eyes kindled wild flames when they found hers. His bigness filled the small shop as she flung open the door and went in.

"Hi, chicken," he called, glancing up quickly and then back to the boots he was tooling.

Marny framed herself in the doorway, her clenched fists on her levi-clad hips. Her heart banged crazily against her ribs. Her mouth spread into a thin, angry line of red.

Why didn't he stop that infernal tooling and come and grab her in his arms, like he usually did? He was probably putting the finishing touches on some fancy boots for Carla Stevens. No time to give her anything but a quick look.

"Mel," she said, her voice quivering in low anger. "I've just seen Carla."

He looked up and grinned. Marny's heart took a flop to her toes. When Mel smiled it was sunshine over water, a bright sparkling morning, happy music.

"She's quite a gal, eh chicken?" he said. "Going to give you all a run for your money. That's just what the gals around here need. A little competition."

Marny seethed, while her soft brown eyes shot out sparks of white flame.

"I can do without the competition," she said cuttingly. "And I can do without her interference."

Mel twisted his eyebrow and squinted amusedly. Marny didn't give him a chance to speak.

"Why doesn't she go back to her 'lovely school' back east and leave our 'horrible, dirty West' to those who like it here?" she asked.

Mel dropped his tools and went to her. "Why chicken, what's the matter?" A smile hovered but his voice was concerned.

"You know what's the matter," she flared. "You're going to let Carla Stevens ride Thunder."

Mel smiled broadly now. "Why, honey, I declare you're jealous." He caught her to him. "Oooo, you little spitfire. I like it when those eyes are full of brown fire. Sorta matches my honey's red curls."

Marny jerked away. "I'm not jealous. I think you're just a fool to let a stuck-up dude ride the best horse you've ever entered in the fair. Besides, there is a certain thing like keeping your word."

Mel's grin left his face. "I'm sorry, honey. I intended telling you right off, but I've been busy."

MARNY could have bitten her tongue. A lump rose in her throat to stop her next words. She didn't like hurting him, but he had no right to let Carla Stevens ride Thunder. He wasn't keeping his word, for he had promised her that she could ride the black.

It wasn't so much another girl riding the horse as it was Carla. Carla Stevens was the spoiled niece of Buck Stevens, one of the biggest ranch men in Bear Valley. She had always lived in the East, coming occasionally to her uncle's ranch for vacations. She was a hot-house plant if there ever was one, who hated the wind against her face or the sun beating against her bare head. Why did she want to ride Thunder when she didn't like the West or the ranch or even horses?

The angry flame burned deeply. Marny knew why. Carla wanted Mel. She was making a play for him, just as she had for all the other boys. How any of them could fall for her highfalutin' ways and her broad, affected speech was more than Marny could see.

Mel looked at her. "I have to let her ride Thunder, chicken."

"You don't," snapped Marny. "Thunder is your horse and you can do what you like."

Mel shook his head. "Not this time. Buck Stevens is head of the Horse Fair this year. He's asked me to let Carla ride him. I didn't think you would mind this much."

"I do mind," Marny stormed. "That silly little blonde has come out here to upset everything. Well, she's not going to upset my plans. She might be able to wrap you and the rest of these calf-eyed galoots around her pink fingers, but she can't fool me." She turned to go.

Mel caught her arm. His touch sent a warmth surging over her as always. Sending fire like a Fourth of July sparkler through her veins. The angry flame tearing through her counteracted the sweeter one, but Marny knew if he kissed her, she'd weaken as always.

"Chicken, you don't understand," Mel said urgently. "Buck Stevens is always my highest bidder. He may buy Thunder. I can't tell you about it now, but all this means a great deal to me. Try to understand."

Marny pulled from him. "I understand only one thing, cowboy. You'd rather please a stuck-up city gal than me!" Hot tears brimmed Marny's eyes. "Well, go ahead! Please her! Kowtow to her rich uncle. But you needn't come palaverin' round me afterwards!"

She started out the door, then turned. "And I'll do everything I can to keep her from riding Thunder!"

She flung violently out into the street and ran to her horse. She was trembling so much she could scarcely put her foot in the stirrup.

It was all Carla Stevens fault! Well, she would see to it that that snippy city brat didn't get her way this time. She'd fix it that she'd go skidaddlin' so fast back to her city life, she'd never show her face around these parts again. Marny hoped it wasn't too late. Maybe those long white fingers of hers had already roped in Mel Roarch.

A sudden idea flashed across her brain as she headed for home. She'd get Jose Rizetto to help her keep Carla from riding the stallion. He was the handsome Mexican foreman of the Stevens ranch, and the only man who seemed indifferent to Carla's charms. Marny didn't know just what she would do, but she knew she would be able to count on Jose. From the way he reacted to Carla's flirting, he might be glad to put

the highfalutin' tenderfoot in her place.

She took the left fork in the wide road that led out of town and headed for Buck Stevens' Square B Ranch.

The cool breeze blowing down from the canyon had cooled her anger, but she was no less determined as she passed through the ranch gate and started toward the corrals.

Luck was with her. Jose was leaning against the corral fence watching a riderless black stallion tear up the dirt. Other cowhands watched. The horse stopped short and tossed his head, while his nostrils spread in snorts of excitement. Marny gasped. It was Black Thunder!

What was he doing at Square B Ranch?

Jose untangled his long legs from the lower rail and came over to her.

JOSE RIZETTO was lean and hard, and his black eyes reflected an inner hardness to match his taut muscles, his stubborn jaw. He touched his hat as she slid to the ground.

"Well," she laughed to hide the returning anger. "Our little city visitor hasn't wasted any time. Or didn't you know?" She nodded toward the black horse cavorting in the corral. She mustn't reveal her true feelings. She mustn't let Jose have the faintest inkling of any shenanigans she intended to pull.

Jose gave her an idle smile, while his black eyes softened.

"Si, Señorita. Our little city visitor, I am much afraid, is in for lot of trouble. The black one is much more spirited than she think."

They walked to the fence. "Oh, I've been on Black Thunder. He's a lamb—if you know how to handle him," Marny said pointedly.

Jose's eyes grew flinty hard. "That is just it. Mees Carla do not know about horses."

"Oh, but she does," Marny returned. "She's had riding lessons in the East."

Jose leaned against the corral fence and shrugged his shoulders in disgust. "What ees riding lessons! She should leave well enough alone."

There was something in Jose's attitude that made Marny wonder. Had he too finally succumbed to Carla's charms?

"I am not sure I can help her," Jose said. "Roarch should be the one."

Marny's heart pounded violently. "Oh, you mean Mel isn't going to?"

"No, he hasn't time. Mees Carla think he going to, but Roarch has left it up to me." Jose was grim. "Si, Roarch should be the one to teach the little one thees boy's tricks."

Marny smothered a smile, hoisted herself to the top rail and gave a low, shrill whistle. The stallion threw up his head in recognition and came tearing toward them, kicking up the dust. A frown puckered Jose's forehead.

Marny grinned. "That's one of the tricks I know about him. That whistle sets him crazy. He hates it. He really goes loco when he hears it."

Her brain was spinning. Suddenly her whole scheme took shape. Slanting her eyes toward Jose, she gave him a calm smile. "Why not let me teach Carla how to ride Thunder? As long as Mel has promised her that she can ride the horse at the Fair, she should be allowed to do what she wants."

Jose was silent for a moment; then he said quietly, "That is the trouble, Mees Marny—she gets to do everything she want to do. Thees is one thing she shouldn't."

Marny's heart skipped to her toes. Jose was playing right into her scheme. If she could be the one to show Carla Stevens how to handle the horse, she knew the Eastern girl would never ride Thunder in the Horse Fair.

"Oh, she'll be safe with me," persisted the little redhead.

"It is all right with me, if it is right with Roarch," said Jose, shrugging.

Marny drew a deep sigh and chuckled inwardly. "I'll go right in and tell her."

Jose gave her a tight smile. "Thanks, Señorita, I have not much of the hankering for sometheeng like that. Jose like the horse better than the women."

Triumphantly, Marny started toward the ranch house.

"Now we'll see who gets their way this time," she muttered. "One thing is certain. When I get through with Carla Stevens she'll never want to look at a horse again as long as she lives."

But her conscience was acting up. She didn't like doing this sort of thing. She had no intention of hurting Carla—she just didn't want her riding Thunder.

Carla was in the low-raftered living room sipping a glass of lemonade.

"Come in, Marny," the blonde sighed. "I'm completely exhausted from that ride this morning."

Her exaggerated speech disgusted Marny as she stood in the middle of the room and looked down at the girl lying sprawled on the sofa.

"How you Western girls (she pronounced it "guhls") can tolerate all the riding you do is more than I can see," she finished.

Marny could see why the boys would fall for her softness, her apparent helplessness. The pale shimmery dress of blue showed off all the curves, made a perfect background for her ivory skin, emphasized the deep blue of her dark fringed eyes. She was like a figurine of spun glass.

"How can you ride Thunder, then, if a tame little ride on a gentle pinto affects you so?" Marny asked.

Carla sat upright and she spread her blue eyes wide in an affected eagerness. "Oh, that's different. I have to prove I can handle that monster for a definite reason. A certain man is going to think differently about me after the Fair is over."

Marny had been right, then. Carla had set her cap to lasso Mel. She was out to get him at any cost. That was the reason she wanted to ride Thunder. Marny's blood churned cold.

"Why not let me teach you to ride Thunder, Carla?" she asked. "I know all about that horse. I'll see to it that you surprise that man."

Carla grasped Marny's hands with a dramatic gesture. "Oh, you're a dear! Would you? Of course, you're a darling anyway to give up riding that fiend just for me."

Marny shrugged her shoulders. "It's just Western hospitality." She got up to leave. "See you early in the morning, then, for that first lesson, Carla."

The blonde let her long black lashes drop against her ivory cheeks. "Oh, no. No, I couldn't possibly. I couldn't possibly take my lesson with that horrid sun beating down on me. It will have to be after the sun goes down."

"But—" Marny begun.

"You silly girl," Carla said. "I'd get freckles all over and men don't like girls with freckles." She let her eyes slide over Marny standing in the doorway. "Of course on you, darling, they're perfect."

Marny smothered a gasp, agreed with Carla to meet her late the following afternoon and left quickly before she let herself go and told this blonde what she really thought.

"The cat," she seethed. "The stuck-up cat! I won't let her ride Thunder now if I have to break her leg!"

CHAPTER TWO

Boomerang Plot

THE day came up clear, but huge, gray thunderheads were gathering on the far side of Bear Mountain. "Fine thing," Marny muttered, as she stood watching them from the kitchen porch. "The darn storm couldn't wait until after I had given Carla her lessons."

But the storm didn't break. Th heavy clouds lay stubbornly across the shoulders of the distant hills like an onimous cape. And as the sun fought its way through their grayness, Marny set out for the Square B Ranch to teach Carla Stevens the tricks of handling Black Thunder.

Thunder was already in the corral and a couple of the cowhands were putting the saddle on him. The big black sensed that something unusual was about to take place. He beat his hoofs nervously against the soft ground, eyeing the boys with distrust.

He had a tough heart, but his brain and nerves might have belonged to the best horse ever to come out of a racing stable. He was by far the finest horse that Mel had ever captured.

As Marny rode into the ranch yard, she saw Carla going toward the corral. She was dressed as fancy as if she had intended riding in the Grand March on the spot. Slick riding breeches, a blue silk blouse and a blue ribbon twisted around her blonde head. She wouldn't look quite so pretty, Marny thought, when she got through the riding lesson.

Marny was glad that Jose wasn't around. He had served his purpose and he might not like what he would see. It was the time of the afternoon when most of the ranch hands were busy with the evening chores. Marny would be alone with Carla with the exception of the two boys with Thunder.

She chortled almost wickedly as she dismounted.

Carla wore an uneasy frown when Marny came up to her. "He's really wild, isn't he?" she said.

Marny detected a small quiver of fear in the blonde's voice.

"You just have to know to handle that boy," the little redhead smiled. "I'll ride him first to show you."

She opened the corral gate.

"You sure he won't throw me?" said Carla anxiously.

"Not if you do as I say."

"Maybe I shouldn't. . . . But I wouldn't want to disappoint Uncle Buck and . . ."

Marny's mouth tightened. "And you certainly want to surprise a certain cowpoke," she said grimly.

"Of course," said Carla flapping her eyelashes. "I just wasn't too sure you could handle the horse either."

That did it! Marny fumed inwardly. Nobody had ever questioned her ability with horses. She had ridden them since she was three years old. She had her first blue ribbon when she was ten. She had prizes and blue ribbons for her trick riding!

"I'll not let her get by with *any* of it," she muttered.

Quickly she mounted, as one of the boys held the bridle bit. Black Thunder arched his head, reared up on his hind legs for a split second, and the cowboys went scrambling.

From the corral fence, Carla gave a faint squeal. Then Marny settled the big black into a fast walk, circled the corral a couple of times and guided him to the gate.

"Open up, boys," she called to the wranglers.

"We ain't supposed to let you out of the corral, ma'am," one of them said.

Marny's brown eyes sparked dark fire. "I said open up! I'm the one who's giving this lesson."

"Them orders are from Mel, Miss Marny," he persisted.

Mel! He had been plenty concerned for Carla's safety.

"Mel knows I can handle Black Thunder. It'll be easier for me to show Carla everything if we have more space to work in."

The cowboy took off his hat and scratched his head. He squinted up into Marny's face. "I guess I'd better not, ma'am. Orders is orders."

Marny hesitated. She knew full well the corral was the only place to give the lesson, but her hate for the stuck-up blonde clinging to the corral fence put a fresh urgency to her plans.

"If you don't open that gate, I'll get down and do it myself," she said.

The cowpoke jumped to unfasten the gate. "I ain't goin' to be held to blame for this, ma'am," he whined.

MARNY led the horse to the block so that Carla could mount. She held the bridle. Black Thunder was behaving beautifully. In fact, if he continued this good behavior there would be no need of lessons at all.

She showed Carla the trick of holding a taut rein. She warned her about steady knees with feet firm in the stirrups. Never for a moment could you relax on the back of Black Thunder.

She walked him. She ran him with Carla sitting tight in the saddle. Then she let her go on her own. Black Thunder was still performing like a gentleman. Lifting his feet proudly, shaking his black mane so that it fell from his head like a black banner.

"Take him down to the stables and bring him back in a slow walk," she called to the blonde on the stallion.

Carla obeyed. She was turning the horse's head now to bring him toward her.

"Now's the time," Marny muttered under her breath. "Now's the time to give this city gal the scare of her life!"

She gave a high, sharp whistle. The stallion stopped dead in his tracks and threw up his head. She whistled again. Carla grabbed the saddle horn in terror as the big black did a two-step on his hind legs. Then tossing his head, he made a dash toward the road that led out the back toward the hills.

Suddenly frightened, Marny ran to stop him. Black Thunder stomping his hoofs and kicking up his legs a little was a different matter from Black Thunder running away with Carla. There was no telling what would happen.

Then her heart froze, for tearing in the ranch gate was Mel. He brought his horse to a stop in a whirling cloud of dust and ran toward the stampeding stallion.

Carla had let loose her hold of the saddle horn, and sheer terror was stamped in her face. Marny could see that in a matter of seconds Thunder would jump the split-rail fence.

The two ranch hands had circled down from the other side to try to stop him. Marny stumbled and fell. Too late she realized that her trick had boomeranged. She hadn't wanted to hurt Carla, only frighten her. Maybe if she whistled again it would stop him. It was a sound that seemed to check him whatever he was doing.

She tried to get to her knees. It seemed like figures were dashing around from all directions now. She whistled with all her strength. It stopped Mel, but not Thunder.

"You little fool!" he yelled, grabbing her fiercely to her feet. "You want to kill her?" His sweet mouth twisted in sarcastic anger. "You know that horse goes crazy when he hears any kind of a whistle!"

She wanted to scream out that she was sorry. That she was only trying to stop the horse. That she loved him and she didn't care if Carla rode Thunder, if only his eyes would kiss hers again with their old warmth.

Instead he almost threw her from him while he ran toward Carla.

Thunder had jumped the fence and Carla lay sprawled in the gray dirt of the ranch yard. Marny scrambled over to the group where Mel was bent down over the Eastern girl.

"She tried to kill me," cried Carla hysterically, gasping out the words. "I can see now why she wanted to teach me. She —she didn't want me to ride your horse, Mel!"

A wild spurt of hate plunged Marny's heart. "No, I didn't want you to ride Thunder," she cried grimly. "I didn't want you to ride him because you're not good enough. You're not even good enough to ride a horse on a merry-go-round."

Carla sat upright and her blue eyes widened in amazement. "Are you going to let

Marny talk to me like that, Mel Roarch?"

Marny looked down at her with disgust. She wasn't hurt at all. Hornswogling Mel into thinking she was! Couldn't he see through her highfalutin bag of tricks?

Mel lifted Carla to her feet and she threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, I'm hurt, I can't walk," she whimpered.

He gathered her up in his arms, while a pain stabbed Marny's heart.

He turned, cold, hard eyes toward her. "Well, you've done what you said you would," he said scornfully. "Carla won't ride Black Thunder now. No one will be able to ride him after this, even if we find him in time."

He turned and started for the ranch house with the blonde in his arms.

Marny stood rooted to the spot. Angry tears blurred the figure of the cowboy disappearing in the house with Carla clinging to his neck. She went over to her horse hitched at the rack, mounted slowly and rode gloomily out the ranch gate toward her home ranch.

Thoughts churned about in her brain like the angry-looking clouds which had hung against the sky all day. She'd lost Mel. He'd never forgive her for what she had done. She couldn't blame him. Carla could never have done as much damage to Thunder as she had done. All his weeks of breaking and training the wild horse had been ruined in one moment of jealous anger.

CHAPTER THREE

Peril in Indian Canyon

THE following morning was overcast. The storm clouds had spread. Rain was certain. Marny decided she had better ride down to Rock Junction and register for the trick riding contest before the storm came.

Her heart lay like a dead thing inside of her, but there was no use letting the incident of the evening before keep her from competing in the rodeo. Talk from the bunk house wasn't too encouraging about Black Thunder.

When old Sam came up to the house with the milk, he told Marny what he had heard.

"Reckon Mel and the boys have been up most the night tryin' to find Thunder 'fore the storm hits up," he wheezed. "Thunder ditched his saddle down the trail a piece from the ranch. Ain't that somepin'? I allus said Mel never would be able to keep that black demon fenced in. Got too much of the wild in his heart."

"I could find that horse," Marny said between set lips. "I'll bet he headed for Indian Canyon."

" 'Tain't fer you to meddle, honey," said Sam. "They wouldn't give you no compliment if you did find him."

"I ought to, Sam. I'm responsible for his running away."

"You listen to old Sam. You stay outen it. Mel Roarch wants to act like a mountain burro jest 'cause you got a little rambuctious, let him look fer his horse hisself."

Sam's words only increased her desire to make amends. When she got through with her registration, she'd go by Mel's shop. She would tell him she was sorry.

The low, squat buildings on the fair grounds swarmed with cowboys and girls who had come to register for the various contests. It seemed to Marny that many of them purposely avoided speaking to her. Surely the talk hadn't gotten around that fast..

She swung in fast strides to the office and flung back her red head proudly as she went in the door. Jose was back of the desk taking the registrations. Marny hesitated, a lump creeping into her throat. She hated facing Jose. He knew. He was bound to know all about it.

His dark eyes penetrated hers as she came up to him. His coldness sent chill through Marny's heart.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," she blurted.

"I had no idea the horse would throw Carla."

He said grimly, "The little one might have been killed."

Marny stared. "Why, I believe you're half in love with her!"

Jose's jaw tensed. "If I had known what you would do, I would have give the lesson myself. Because of the accident I cannot let you register for any of the contests."

"What!" cried Marny. "You haven't any authority to keep me from registering."

"Si," he said tersely. "But the board can and they are the ones who have made this decision."

The board! Buck Stevens, Jose—Mel!

Marny stood numbed; then she turned and stomped furiously to the door. This wasn't fair. They had no right to keep her from entering the contests. That had nothing to do with what had happened at the Square B. Carla again! She was back of all this.

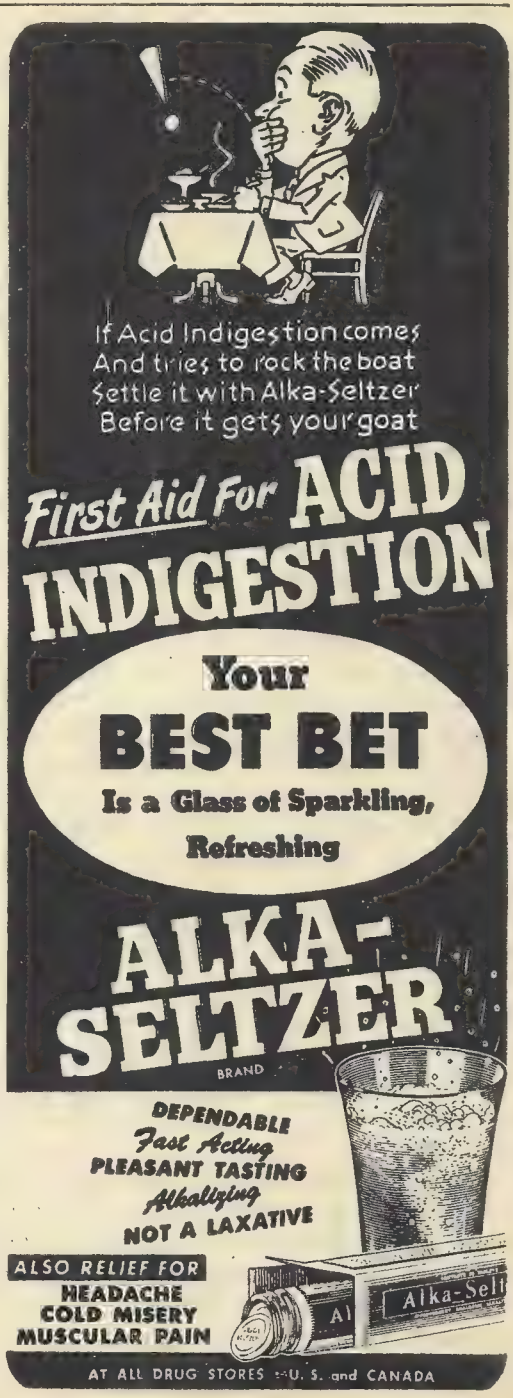
She headed for Mel's shop. He must be made to see the unfairness. Even if he had fallen for Carla Stevens' highfalutin ways, he should be able to see that they had no right to keep her from competing in the contests. Her white anger had turned into a burning sense of disappointment. For the first time in her life she wasn't to be in the Horse Fair and Rodeo.

She put her hand on the wooden bar to open the door when she heard voices. Mel was inside. Then a soft cultered voice answered his. Carla was with him! Blindly she turned to go. Then Carla's words stopped her.

"I really think Uncle Buck went a little too far, darling," she said. "Keeping Marny from entering the contests. After all, I wasn't hurt too badly. And Marny was right. I should never have attempted to ride that demon horse. I think you thought so too, Mel."

There was a muffled answer from Mel. Then silence. A sharp picture of Mel's mouth pressed against Carla's red lips pierced Marny's brain. A dry sob burst from her throat.

Carla gave a sigh as she continued. "I'm afraid everything was a terrible, terrible



mistake. For all my trouble, Jose didn't even come in last night to see if I was badly hurt. So even if I had ridden Thunder in the fair, he probably wouldn't have given me a second glance."

Marny's eyes spread wide in astonishment. It was Jose that Carla wanted to impress! It had been Jose all along!

"I guess it's my fault about Thunder running away too, Mel," murmured Carla.

Mel's voice came clear then, like a knife in Marny's heart. "It would have meant a lot to me this year. I wanted that third win. Most of all I wanted that five-thousand-dollar prize."

So that was what he had meant, thought Marny frantically, when he said the other day that it meant a lot to him this year. He knew the stakes were going to be higher. It was those stakes that were going to help buy that spread they had planned on. It was that money that was going to enable them to set up their ranch. Mel had planned to surprise her!

She ran quickly to her horse. The sky might be dark with ugly clouds but there was brightness flaring in her heart. It didn't make any difference now if she couldn't compete in the rodeo. All she wanted was to find Thunder for Mel. She knew places that the boys might overlook. Even if Mel's eyes were still hard when they looked at her, she would find Thunder for him.

As she started down the main street of Rock Junction, the wind rose and came in great gusts stirring up the dust. In the distance behind the hills, thunder rolled down Bear Mountain. She would have to hurry to beat the rain. It was still mid-morning, but the day was almost as dark as night.

It might be a foolhardy thing—trying to beat the storm. Even if she took the short cuts which she knew into the mountain, the rain might come before she could reach the hidden canyon where Thunder might be hunkered.

She would have to risk it. . . .

BACK at her ranch, Sam was mending harness on the back stoop. She slipped from her saddle and ran up on the porch.

"Better be gittin' home, honey. It's goin' to rain little dogs and big cats," he chortled.

"Just picking up my slicker," she called out as she disappeared into the kitchen.

He looked at her anxiously as she came out the door, the slicker rolled under her arm.

"I'm going to look for Thunder," she said gaily, getting into her saddle again. "Indian Canyon."

"You're loco," yelled out Sam as she spurted out the gate.

She put her mare to a gallop as she turned into the trail that would take her to the mountains. As she tore upward, the sparse mesquite gave way to taller trees and dense underbrush. She came to the narrow stream where so often she and Mel had stopped for a quick kiss.

He would never do it again, cried her fearful heart.

On the tree-covered slope, with the wind tearing through the tops of the pines, the day was even more foreboding. The sky was hidden. She would follow the stream upward until she reached High Meadow, then take the narrow cut through to Indian Canyon. There in back of the mythical falls was a small valley where once a long time ago she and Mel had first sighted the black stallion. The valley was small, hardly the size of two good-sized corrals.

It seemed like a thousand years ago now. Her world would never be the same if Mel didn't hold her in his arms again.

She put her horse through the shallow stream of water. She must make the hidden valley and get back before it started raining, otherwise she might not be able to cross the stream again. Even at its narrowest part, sometimes it would swell and wasn't passable.

This time of the year was bad, too. Flash floods were common with the first rains of spring. Marny pushed the thought far back

in her brain. She knew enough about the terrain of these mountains. Even if there was a flash flood, she knew the high places.

Then the rain caught her. Dashing across the grassy meadow, she saw Indian Canyon in the distance. There were ledges where she could seek shelter until the storm had passed. She couldn't tell the time of day, for the sun had long since been buried deep in the gray clouds sweeping across the sky.

The rain was coming in great drops, making loud splashes on her Stetson and plastering her cotton blouse against her skin. She must hurry, get into her slicker. Huge boulders slowed her pace as she pushed her horse toward the narrow slit of the canyon walls.

The opening into the valley beyond Indian Canyon was a creek bed that had been dry for years. The water had diverted itself, and for as long as Marny could remember the falls had been a myth. Now the rain coming down in torrents gave the illusion of falls. At the entrance to the passage there were overhanging rocks. There she would seek refuge until the rain slackened. She had been in worse rain storms than this. Besides Thunder might be just on the other side.

It seemed time stood still as she urged her horse to the slit in the canyon wall. The rain beating against her face blinded her.

Suddenly through the pouring rain she saw she had reached the passage. Quickly she got off her horse and ran to the shelter of a rock ledge, holding tight to the rein of her mare. The water was sluicing over the rocks of the opening and trickling down into the abandoned creek bed. Ground-hitching her mare, she crept the length of the slit until she could see into the hidden valley. *Thunder wasn't there!*

She let out a sharp sigh of disappointment.

But the sigh turned to a shrill cry of horror. A gushing, angry wall of water was tearing toward her. The stream higher in the mountains had torn through into its old bed. A flash flood! Marny turned to stumble back to the safety of the ledge where she had left her horse.

"Mel!" she screamed, as she clutched the rocks to pull herself to higher ground. "Mel—Mel!"

But the scream bursting her throat was silenced by the flood of mountain water which came pummeling against her. It caught her like a toy and bounced her in its angry flow over the rocks and boulders in its path.

Her screams only intensified her anguish, for great gulps of the dirty water washed into her throat. Dry branches from trees and stones from the canyon bruised her face and hands. She fought to cling to any piece of flotsam sweeping past her.

Another great rush of water swept down on her, and through the creeping blackness of her agony, she saw dimly a huge hulk bearing down on her. The mad, swirling waters was tearing trees up by the roots. Now she wouldn't have a chance. She knew now she would never feel Mel's arms around her again.

The great hulk was almost on her. Then she realized it was a horse. Her mare. She hadn't escaped the flood waters either. Marny reached out frantically for the bridle while the waters tore against her ebbing strength. The horse would keep her alive if she could hold on.

Her icy, slippery fingers clutched for the horse. She caught a rein as a great wave tossed her against the horse's body.

Grab the saddle, her weary brain yelled. But the horse didn't have a saddle.

I must be delirious, she thought. *Of course my horse had a saddle. I remember putting it on her . . . . Thunder didn't have a saddle—but Thunder wasn't in the canyon . . . . I'm sorry Mel . . . . I wanted to bring Thunder back to you . . . . Even if you don't love me any more, I wanted to bring Thunder back to you. . . .*

Then the water washed over her, dragging her down. Darkness closed in. . . .

THERE was a stillness which only the open spaces can bring. There was a serene calm which only can come with a spent storm. The blackness was unending. Then suddenly in the cool wet air, against the gurgling of the receding waters, voices came out of the darkness. Some one was coming to help her.

Marny slowly and painfully opened her eyes. The sun had burst through the fleeing clouds, spilling a red glow over the drenched earth.

She was lying on the debris-strewn banks of the swollen creek, tightly clutching the reins of a big black horse. She could see with her pain-wracked eyes where she had been dragged from the rushing stream. A little distance away was—her mare. Marny stared at the big black horse standing beside her.

She had found Thunder!

A delicious surrender to the blackness enveloped her again. This time she knew she was fainting. The voices were a mirage created by her numb brain. All that mattered now was that she had found Thunder. She had found Thunder for Mel. She could take him in and tell Mel she was sorry for everything.

Then in the dream that was twisting and swirling like a phantom, she felt warm lips pressed against her own. Someone was holding her hard against his chest.

She opened her eyes once more and they were filled with a familiar face. Deep anxiety etched the loved features. His eyes were no longer hard and his arms held her tightly.

With a brown hand Mel pushed her wet hair gently away from her face. "Chicken, chicken, you crazy chicken," he said. "To think I almost lost you."

She lifted a weak hand to his cheek. "I found Thunder, Mel. The creek gave us a rough time, but he's safe. You can still enter him in the fair."

Mel Roarch held her close to his heart. "To hell with that horse!" he cried. "If it hadn't been for Sam telling Carla that you were headed for Indian Canyon, he might have been the death of you."

Marny's eyes swept slowly over to the others who had come up with Mel. Sam holding Thunder and her mare by their bridle bits. Cowboys who had trying to round up Thunder. Jose. And Carla.

She smiled weakly. "Why, even Carla's here!"

The blonde left Jose's side and dropped down on the ground beside Marny. "Yes, even me, Marny. I was so ashamed that my uncle had ruled against you entering the contests, I went up to your ranch to say I was sorry."

Marny gave the other girl's hand an affectionate pat.

"Sam was worried because you had come up to Indian Canyon with the storm coming, so I went back and told Mel."

Marny looked deep into the other girl's eyes. She had been all wrong about Carla. She wasn't as highfalutin and selfish as she had thought. That had been in her imagination. Carla had wanted Jose to notice her so badly, she had been willing to risk almost anything.

A girl in love does crazy things. Marny had been even crazier than Carla.

"But why—why did you come with them?" Marny murmured. "You don't like—"

Carla glanced over at Jose. "I had to prove to a certain man that I could take it like any other gal of the West."

Jose came over and slipped his arm around Carla. "Si, she did, Mees Marny. She prove it."

Marny saw the love shining in the darkness of Jose's eyes and gave a soft laugh. Carla had corraled her man.

Then she slipped an arm around Mel's neck. Her eyes were dewy soft through her wet lashes. She'd corraled her man too.

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A KISS MEANS

Rollicking Cow-Country Romance

CHAPTER ONE

Gamblin' Gal

VICKI MORAN slammed her hat down on the grocery counter and glared around at the ranchers and townsmen collected in the general store, as only a green-eyed redhead can glare.

"Getting this highfalutin' gunhand Jim Garry in here," she said with tight-lipped restraint, "is fine for you fellows. You can afford to hang on and wait until he cleans up the country, but what about me? I've already lost every ding-blasted calf that was big enough to walk!"

Jeff White, the owner of the store, automatically shoved the spectacles up on his

WAR

♥ ♥ ♥ By A. C. Abbott ♥ ♥ ♥

"There was nothing in the bet," he drawled, "about me helpin' you kiss me."

Vicki was just a cowgirl fighting to save her spread—with some rather audacious weapons.

nose before rubbing his ear thoughtfully. "If what they say about this Jim Garry is true," he said mildly, "he'll have the job done in a month."

"Yeah," Vicki said acidly, "a month. By then I'll be so doggone broke I'll have to give you the ranch to cover the grocery bill. *If* that would cover it," she added bitterly.

It hadn't been much of a ranch to start with, but Vicki had had great hopes for it up until two months ago when a reign of terror had swept through the valley like a prairie fire. One of her cowboys had been shot off his horse within half a mile of the home corral. The other had received a letter suggesting the climate would suit him better somewhere else—and he had promptly agreed.

"If I had one *man* to help me—" Vicki began, then bit her tongue to stop its futile wagging.

The strained silence in the store was broken by the shuffling of boots as men shifted uncomfortably, each eyeing his neighbor sidelong but carefully avoiding Vicki's accusing gaze. All except Nate Travis, the young black-headed foreman of the Rafter N. His dark eyes met Vicki head on.

"I'd ride for you in a minute, Vicki," he said evenly, "if I hadn't given the old man my word that I'd stay on with the outfit till this trouble's over."

"Yeah, I know," Vicki said, squirming under his familiar, probing glance, "and I appreciate that, Nate. But it's not keeping my calves from wandering off."

"Well, hell," Jeff White said irritably. "Nate ain't the only cowboy in the country. That job might be kind of risky since a man would be all by himself, but you can get somebody to take it if you're willing to pay fightin' wages."

That was the whole trouble. Vicki couldn't come up with more than twenty bucks, and she couldn't hire any kind of a cowboy with that kind of money.

Pride wouldn't let her admit it, nor would it let her admit that she was licked. Somehow, she told herself desperately, she would scare up fifty or sixty dollars, enough to hire a good man for one month. The month it would take Jim Garry to clean up the country so that her cows could once more have their calves in peace.

"Garry should be showing up any day now," Jeff said thoughtfully.

"All ice water and a gun hand," Vicki said. She was thinking of the pictures she had seen of the noted Jim Garry, and remembering the queer, tight feeling that had gripped her as she studied the expression on his face. It was not a handsome face, exactly, but rugged and strong and—as cold as a rock. The gray eyes had seemed to bore a hole clear through her, even from the page of the newspaper.

"I wonder," she murmured, voicing a thought that had occurred to her then, "what that cold-blooded star toter would do if some gal just waltzed up and kissed him, smack."

"Oh my goodness," Jeff murmured ludicrously.

"Why don't you try it and find out?" Nate suggested.

Something about his deliberate tone made Vicki look at him sharply. He was eyeing her steadily, almost somberly, but there was an intent light in his eyes that hinted strongly of possession. It was that possessiveness that made Vicki uncomfortable. She highly resented the feeling and for that reason made a flippant, rash remark that she didn't mean at all.

"Might," she said.

"Shucks," Jeff snorted. "Such a way for a girl to talk. A half pint like you, at that. Vicki, you know darn well you wouldn't waltz up and kiss any man, much less a stranger. You wasn't brought up that way."

Vicki's head came up like a startled bronc's as an idea popped into it. "What'll you bet?" she challenged.

"Why—" Jeff waved his hand in sudden embarrassment. "What kind of talk is this here?"

"What'll you bet?" Vicki repeated, her voice rising. "You made a pretty strong statement, and I'd like to see you back it up."

THE other men, all at once, were grinning at Jeff, daring him to back down. Vicki sensed that most of their enthusiasm stemmed from a desire to help her—and themselves—escape from this bitter, helpless mood. Any kind of a diversion would have been welcome to them, and silently they put the pressure on Jeff until his face was flaming.

"All right," he said, bobbing his head so emphatically that his thinning gray hair flopped down over his forehead. "I'll bet you ten bucks you haven't got nerve enough to kiss the next man who walks into this store."

"Regardless of who he is, huh?"

"Re-gardless."

"I'll take that bet," Vicki said promptly, completing some swift mental arithmetic. "I'll practice up on the first local jigger who comes in. Then, with all that experience behind me, I'll bet you *thirty* bucks that I'll have nerve enough to hand Mr. Jim Garry a kiss, too, when he shows up."

"Vicki!" Jeff expostulated, his shocked voice rising above the delighted laughter. "What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to make a bet," Vicki said. "What's the matter with *your* nerve?"

Jeff obviously wished that he had kept his mouth shut, but he couldn't back out now. "Vicki," he said firmly, "if your dad was alive, he'd paddle you till you'd have to eat standing up for three weeks."

That, Vicki realized, was true, but it had little to do with the case in point.

This was the first real break she'd had since the local sheriff had skipped the country without leaving a forwarding address. With banks being robbed and men being murdered promiscuously, the country was no longer safe for man, beast or redhead; and Vicki needed reinforcements.

"Is it a bet?" she pressed.

Reluctantly Jeff nodded and Vicki leaned back against the counter, marshaling her forces for what was to be, for her, a new experience. She had been kissed, of course, but it had always been a matter of pride with her that a man worked for the kisses he collected. This time she would be handing them out free.

But it wouldn't be so bad, she assured herself. She knew every man in the country, any one of whom would be glad to cooperate to help her win a bet. Or, for that matter, would be willing to cooperate, bet or no bet. She would have plenty of time after that to screw up her courage for the assault on Jim Garry.

She was aware that Nate had tipped one brawny shoulder against a post in the center of the room and was concentrating, stony faced, on the rolling of a cigarette. For a moment she considered his obvious disapproval and wondered what violent ideas might be churning around inside that black head of his. Then she shrugged off the thought. She needed sixty bucks; and what she did with her kisses was none of Nate Travis' business, although he had made it plain on more than one occasion that he wished it were.

Vicki was thoughtfully rubbing the end of her freckled nose when she heard the thud of boots and the slow clank of spurs on the porch outside the store. She slid quickly away from the counter and planted herself in the middle of the room, her heart hammering but her determination riding high.

"You ready?" Jeff asked, grinning.

Vicki opened her lips to say that she was, but the words were never spoken. As the door swung open, she caught a brief glimpse of the man silhouetted in the doorway, so big that he seemed to fill the aperture completely. Then he closed the door

behind him and stopped short, evidently struck by the expectant silence in the room. His piercing glance swept over the men in the room, then flashed to Vicki and clung there.

Vicki nearly collapsed. If those gray eyes had bored a hole clear through her from the page of a newspaper, what they did to her now couldn't be put into words. She felt as if she were standing in the middle of nowhere, pinpointed by a blinding light.

She caught her breath and looked pleadingly at Jeff. This was different! The storekeeper, however, was leaning over the counter with the smuggest, most heartless expression Vicki had ever seen. He merely nodded; and, with a terrible effort, Vicki pulled that suspended breath on into her lungs and looked again at Jim Garry.

He hadn't moved.

Desperately, she ran her gaze down over him in an effort to relieve the pressure of those piercing eyes. A gray checkered shirt that made his shoulders appear a yard wide. A lean waist around which sagged a cartridge belt supporting a deadly-look, black-handled gun.

That was as far as Vicki got. She just couldn't go through with it. She had turned to say as much to Jeff when she remembered with breathtaking suddenness that she didn't have enough money to pay off the bet. She *had* to go through with it!

VICKI pulled in her breath with a painful gulp and started forward, her spurs dragging. The nearer she came to Jim Garry the bigger he looked—and the smaller she felt.

As Vicki came to a halt in front of him, he removed his hat and waited politely for her to state her business. Vicki took one brief look at his curly hair and plunged, before she had time to look at his eyes again.

"Mister," she said, "you're stuck."

"Yeah?" He spoke in a low drawl, as guardedly impersonal as the expression on his sun-darkened face. "How so?"

"That four-eyed cooky peddler—" Vicki twisted one slender arm to point to Jeff—"bet me a total of forty bucks that I wouldn't have nerve enough to kiss the—the first man who came in here."

"Hell he did!" Garry lifted a stabbing glance at Jeff. Then he set his hat on the back of his head and lifted his hands to his hips in a gesture that smacked strongly of challenge.

Vicki nodded jerkily. "Kinda silly of me, I suppose," she said, trying to speak in an offhand manner when her voice wanted to squeak, "but I took the bet and I—I can't afford to pay off. So I guess you're it."

She lifted one hand in a light airy gesture that had no effect whatsover on Jim Garry.

"If you can't afford to lose," he said, "you shouldn't gamble."

"Well, yes, I guess that's right but I—" She paused to get her breath, then looked up at him hopefully. "You never slug a girl, do you?"

"I've never found it necessary."

"Well, then—"

"I just turn 'em over my knee."

Vicki couldn't restrain a gasp, but the snicker that arose behind her drove her to desperate measures. With sudden belligerence, she gave the belt to her levis a hitch and eyed him sternly.

"Are you gonna cooperate?" she demanded. "Or do I have to throw you down and tie you?"

Garry didn't bat an eye as he said, *"I'll* bet you forty bucks on that."

A snicker traveled around the room again, and Vicki felt like turning and running. For a moment she eyed Jim Garry with a fine mixture of exasperation and apprehension. His face showed nothing, but his eyes were sparkling like two little bonfires in Hades.

That fact bothered her, but it was also

encouraging, so she stepped up to him, putting her hands on his shoulders and tilting her head back expectantly. Garry didn't move. His lips, Vicki found, were still hopelessly out of reach.

"Well, do something!" she burst out in vexation.

"There was nothin' in the bet," he drawled, "about me helpin' you kiss me."

"But I can't reach you!"

"Get yourself a chair," he suggested.

Vicki stepped back, fighting down an almost irresistible desire to drive one square-toed boot into his favorite shin. What a person wouldn't do for forty bucks! Then she dragged in a hissing breath and went doggedly after a chair, muttering to herself a most unladylike opinion of long-legged men in general and long-legged lawmen in particular.

Garry still stood rock still, hands on hips, as she pulled the chair up in front of him and climbed onto it. She grabbed the shoulders of his shirt in both little fists and looked him square in the eye for one fleeting second.

"Now then, doggone you," she gritted.

Swiftly she bent her head, planted a noisy, smacking kiss on his lips and then jerked back. She had started to turn, to jump off the chair and make a run for it, when she saw that his eyes had narrowed to a skeptical squint.

"You call that a kiss?" he asked coolly.

For a moment incredulity held Vicki rooted, staring at him blankly. Then her red-headed pride yelled in outrage.

"Well of all the—!"

Vicki didn't bother trying to finish what she had started to say. She just grabbed him around the neck and leaned over to show him what this kissing business was all about.

That was her intention—to teach him something. Instead, she learned a thing or two, right quick. In the first place, she learned that his arms were plenty long enough to reach around her with slack to spare, and plenty strong enough to waft her off the chair as if she were a mere bubble in somebody's dream. In the second place, she found that all this action did not interfere in the least with the kissing business.

Jim Garry had her lips and he hung onto them. Vicki was aware, vaguely, that her feet were now on the floor. She was also dimly aware of the high-pitched range yells that were bouncing off the roof all around her, but the only thing that mattered was that this cold-blooded Jim Garry had the most fiery kiss she had ever bumped into.

When he finally broke it off, Vicki had trouble getting her eyes to focus. Then she saw that his face still had not changed expression, although his eyes were prancing around like a couple of frisky colts. She smiled experimentally, but the experiment was a flop.

"What's my cut," he asked evenly, "out of that forty bucks?"

That was too much for Vicki. Suddenly realizing what a ridiculous spectacle she had been making of herself, she twisted out of his arms and gave him a shove that was righteously intended to put him on his back in the middle of the street. Then she let fly with the kick she had contemplated seemingly so long ago.

"That!" she said, glaring at him with hot defiance.

Garry didn't even wince. He just grinned, a wide, devilish grin that turned Vicki's disposition completely inside out. He planted his hands once more on his hips as he allowed his glance to slide down over her in an inspection that made Vicki want to commit murder.

"Plumb wild," he said. "Never been roped and shore never been hobbled. Well—" He shrugged philosophically. "I was hired to tame the country and I believe it's going to be a pleasure!"

"I wouldn't be too sure of that."

Vicki whirled at the sound of the voice to find Nate standing beside her, his face

as tight as a brand new war drum. She had forgotten him and his violent ideas, and now apprehension swept over her like ice water. He had his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt and his narrowed eyes on Jim Garry.

"If I were you," he said coldly, "I'd remember that I was hired to handle the *country.*"

Vicki flashed a quick glance at Garry. It wasn't supposed to be safe to talk to him like that; but he showed no offense, merely looking Nate up and down before turning inquiringly to Vicki.

"Friend of yours?"

"N-Nate Travis," Vicki said with a feeble gesture of introduction.

Garry looked back at Nate, tilting his head back so that he was staring at the man from under half-closed lids. "Shore glad to meet you, Travis. I got a hunch I'll be seein' a lot of you."

The words were pleasant enough, but the manner in which they were spoken was such a clear-cut declaration of war that Vicki shivered violently. She was still shivering and staring at Jim Garry with hypnotic fascination when Nate took her arm possessively and propelled her none too gently toward the door.

CHAPTER TWO

One Cowboy Too Many

VICKI MORAN felt about as necessary as an overcoat when the thermometer stands at a hundred and fifty in the shade. She had a strong feeling that she had started something that was going to get out of hand, but she wasn't sure what it was and she didn't know what she could do about it anyhow.

She offered no resistance as Nate pulled her around to the side of the weather-beaten frame building and there roughly turned her to face him.

"What the hell was the idea," he demanded, "lettin' him rag you like that?"

"I made a bet," Vicki said. It was a very poor answer, but it was the only one she had on hand at the moment.

"You didn't have to go through with it. You could see he was just playing with you!"

Vicki didn't need to be reminded of that. "What were you trying to do?" she countered with considerable heat. "Get yourself shot?"

Nate cut off the idea with a furious gesture. "I'm not afraid of that jigger even if he is a killer. I won't stand for any man makin' a fool of my girl."

"*Your* girl?" Vicki backed up a good long pace so that she could get a better look at him. "I don't recommember just where you got that idea."

"It's no secret that I'm in love with you," he said harshly. He eliminated the distance between them with one long stride, and his hands closed painfully over her arms. "For two cents," he gritted, "I'd turn you upside down and give you what your dad would give you if he was alive."

"He isn't alive," Vicki retorted, jarred into full wakefulness. "Now let go of me so I can go hire myself a cowpuncher."

For answer he shook her slightly. "What are you going to do when that wolf comes around to take up where he left off there in the store?"

"I am going to kick him on the other shin," Vicki said through her teeth. "Let go of me!"

For a long moment he stared down at her, his dark eyes smoldering. Vicki could see that he was seriously considering handing her a kiss, right there in the middle of town. She didn't want his kiss, and it was not altogether because of a possible audience. She had already received one kiss that was going to take a good deal of digesting.

But Nate relaxed suddenly, stepping back and trying to grin. It was a sickly affair, that grin, and for some reason it hit

Vicki right in the middle of her conscience.

"Reckon I ought to apologize for bein' rough," he said ruefully, "but I got the darn fool idea you liked that kiss he gave you."

"You don't need to apologize," Vicki said hastily, feeling her cheeks warm up as if she had inadvertently stepped too close to the stove. That blush, plus her strange feeling of guilt, forced her to be frank with him in spite of her protesting pride. "That was a darn fool thing to do, Nate, but I wasn't just being silly. I needed the money from that bet."

"The money?" he echoed blankly. "What for?"

"I want to hire someone to help me for a month and I—well—" Her tongue failed her and, with her blush growing hotter by the moment, she reached into her jeans and pulled out the lonesome twenty dollars. "That's the size of my pile right at the moment."

For a second Nate stared at her incredulously. Then he blew up. "Why in the hell didn't you say so?"

"Hey!" she admonished, with a quick look over her shoulder to see whether anyone was close enough to hear him. "I'm not deaf, cowboy, yet!"

"Why didn't you tell me?" he repeated, lowering his voice. "I'd have loaned you some money, Vicki."

"You?" Vicki said, startled. "Where would one cowpuncher get money enough to hire another cowpuncher?"

"Somewhere," he said grimly. "I'd have found some way to help you, Vicki."

Vicki couldn't doubt his sincerity, and it warmed her up inside.

"Thanks, Nate," she said softly, putting a hand on his arm. "I knew you would if you could, but I just hated to holler."

"Hell, a girl can't fight this kind of business alone."

"That," Vicki said, "is why I made a fool of myself. I ran this twenty up to fightin' wages, remember?"

Nate suddenly grinned, shaking his head dubiously. "You're the most independent little cuss I ever had anything to do with," he said with grudging admiration. "But what about next month, Vicki? If Garry doesn't get this mess cleaned up—"

"Don't you think he will?" she interrupted anxiously.

He shrugged. "He's supposed to be an awful good man; but if the folks right here in the valley can't find out who's behind all this business, how's he going to?"

Vicki didn't like that idea at all. Then she recalled Jim Garry's self confident manner. Damnably self confident! But he did look like a man who would finish what he set out to do.

"That's his worry," she said and abruptly changed the subject. "Do you know where I can find someone who's willing to get shot at for sixty bucks? Course if he doesn't know how to duck, I won't guarantee that the money will ever do him any good."

"I wish I wasn't tied up," Nate said feelingly. "I'd set myself up as a target for less than that if it meant ridin' with you, but you know we're trying to finish that dam across the creek and I'm the only fella in the outfit that knows anything about blasting."

"Sure," Vicki said.

"But I do know of a feller, Vicki. He came out to the ranch yesterday lookin' for a job. Called himself Shorty, but he looked like he was long enough on brains. You want him?"

"If he knows a cow from a coyote," Vicki said, "I'll take him."

"I'll send him out."

Nate glanced around casually to see whether or not anyone was in sight. Too casually. Vicki's guard was up by the time he turned back to her, his eyes fastened on her lips.

"No, thanks," she said bluntly. "I've had my daily quota. I'll be seeing you, Nate."

SHE softened her words with a smile and waited only long enough to see the start of his defeated grin. Then she turned and hurried down the side of the long building, pausing at the back door for a careful survey of the interior.

She had hoped the crowd had scattered, but she saw instantly that it had not. It had just regrouped itself around Jim Garry, who sat on the edge of the counter, swinging his long legs and listening attentively to the gripes of a disgruntled range.

For a full minute Vicki stared at him while her breathing grew ragged and her lips tightened grimly. That impudent son of satan!

Then she swung away from the door, kicked a small packing box out of her way and headed determinedly toward her horse. She'd pick up that forty dollars and her hat the next time she was in town. Nobody claimed you had to pay a cowpuncher in advance, anyway.

Vicki nearly rode the tail off her horse covering the five miles of timbered grassland between the sprawling town and her snug little ranch. Then, after turning the grateful animal into the small pasture behind the corrals, she drove herself just as hard, cleaning out the small cabin that served as a bunkhouse.

She didn't stop to ask herself why she felt this sudden craving for violent action. She just tore into things.

The cabin hadn't been touched since the last man had left so hurriedly, and it was nearly dark when she finished the cleaning job. Then she tore into her supper, finished it in record time and was plowing her way through three days' accumulation of dirty dishes when Shorty rode in.

He was a bow-legged, brown-faced proposition who might have been anywhere between twenty and forty years old. At least, Vicki figured, he was old enough to know what he was doing, and he packed his gun in a way that suggested he could probably get it done.

"Did Mr. Travis tell you," she asked narrowly, "what this job is apt to be like?"

Shorty's grin crinkled the corners of his greenish-gray eyes. "Yes, ma'am, but me not bein' very big, it takes a pretty good shot to hit me."

"Make yourself at home," Vicki said with prompt decision, waving off through the darkness toward the bunkhouse.

As Shorty turned toward the corrals, leading his horse, Vicki closed the door and leaned back against it, smugly congratulating herself on this day's work. It had cost her something—more than she had as yet allowed herself to consider—but she felt sure that it had been worth it.

With this man to help her, she was still definitely in the cow business and she was still not beholden to anyone. If that conceited Jim Garry was half as good as he was cracked up to be—

Vicki turned abruptly back to her dishwater. That conceited Jim Garry, she told herself vigorously, would find out that Vicki Moran could darn well take care of herself.

She was up early the next morning, eager to get Shorty started on his range riding duties. She fixed breakfast, wondering dubiously how many biscuits and eggs it would take to fill a man Shorty's size. She fixed what she figured would have been enough for three guys his size, then stuck her head out the back door and yelled for him to come and get it.

She saw no sign of him, but she felt sure he had heard. She was bending over, pulling the biscuits from the oven when she heard his tinkling step at the back door.

"Grab yourself a chair," she said, without looking around. "It'll be on the table in just a minute."

"Want me to pour the coffee?"

At the sound of that drawling voice, Vicki spun like a bronc that had just spotted a rattlesnake, staring pop-eyed. Jim Garry, hatless and with his sandy hair kinking up under its morning dousing, was

reaching for the coffee pot as if it belonged to him.

"Mornin'," he said cheerfully.

Vicki opened her lips and moved them into the proper positions, but no sound came out. She lifted one finger in a feeble, inquiring gesture toward the bunkhouse.

"Oh, you're wonderin' about Shorty, huh?" Jim picked up the pot and ambled toward the table to pour the coffee. "Why, after I talked to him last night, he decided he didn't want this job after all, so I'm takin' it."

"You!" The word came out with a ridiculous-sounding squeak.

"Yeah. You see—" he set the pot back on the stove and looked at her with innocent solemnity—"those fellas in town weren't set up to pay me the kind of money I usually get, so I told 'em to keep the money *and* their job. I figured I could do better out here. You take a gamblin' woman like you—"

"Listen, Bub!" Vicki's breath all came back at once and she just couldn't use it up fast enough. "I do the hiring around here, and I don't have to take every long-legged heathen who decides he wants a job. Shorty's the man I hired, and Shorty's the man I want!"

"Shorty's gone," he said, spreading his hands expressively.

"Then I'll find somebody else!" Vicki's furious yell was on the verge of loosening the rafters, but she didn't aim to calm it down. "I wouldn't have you on the place if—"

"You've already got me," he said. "Is this the plate for the biscuits?"

VICKI strangled over the rush of words to her throat. Jim, blissfully ignoring her furious glare, stuffed one biscuit into his mouth and piled the rest of them on the plate Vicki had set out. Then he pulled the platter of bacon and eggs out of the warming oven and carried both dishes to the table. He pulled out a chair, looked at her inquiringly and swallowed the last of the biscuit with an audible gulp.

"You ready to eat?" he said then.

"Listen, you cross between a bloodhound and a tail-waggin' puppy!" Vicki strode to the table and slammed her fist into the middle of the gaily printed oilcloth. "You're not wanted and you're not welcome!"

"But I'm shore hungry," he said and sat down.

Vicki leaned both hands on the table, pulling in a breath that swelled her up like an inflated balloon. Then she held it while she looked him over with minute, murderous care. She saw the twitch of his lips as he looked up at her, but his gray eyes were owlishly wide and solemn.

"Aren't you going to eat?" he asked innocently.

"Mr. Garry," she said with terrible calm, "what must I do to make myself plain? You are not working for me and I will not pay you one little teeny weeny red cent."

"Thassall right," he said, piling another egg onto a plate that already needed sideboards. "I'll work for grub. These biscuits are the kind Mother used to try to make."

"Eat a lot of them," Vicki invited, straightening with a sudden expansive gesture. "Eat all you can hold. Fill yourself plumb up to the top of your empty head! In the meantime, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to town this minute and hire myself a cowboy."

"Won't do you any good," he said evenly. The innocent light had gone out of his eyes, and they were once more boring a hole through her. "Anybody you pick up will get the same wanderin' disease that bit Shorty."

"You mean—?"

"Just that." He paused, tilting his fork up at her and looking her right smack in the eye. "I'm ridin' for you, Miss Moran, and I don't believe you'll find anybody that's gonna argue with me about it. Better eat your breakfast."

"Eat?" Vicki yelled. *"Eat?* Why, dang your soul—"

Once more she choked on her own words and could only glare impotently as Jim lowered his head and calmly began his breakfast. She recalled, altogether too vividly, that Nate had said this wolf would try to take up where he left off there in the store. She also recalled what she had threatened to do; but a kick on the shins, under the circumstances, would be sadly inadequate.

For one brief second Vicki considered batting him over the head with a frying pan. Then she gathered up what dignity she had left and stalked out of the house, slamming the back door so hard it shook the whole building. She kept right on stalking until she was hidden in the thick trees and willows along the creek. There she slowed her pace a little but she had to keep moving, walking around in aimless circles and swinging a vicious kick at any rock that happened to get in her way.

If this wasn't a mess! Not only had she deprived the valley ranchers of their imported lawman but she had got herself saddled with this exasperating jasper.

She wouldn't stand for it, she told herself over and over again. Jim Garry had come down here to break up the mysterious gang of outlaws who were terrorizing the country, and he had to go through with it. He couldn't back out of a deal like that just to drive a girl to the ragged edge of a nervous breakdown. Why, it just wasn't legal!

She had counted on his doing the job in a month, the one month in which she could afford to hire a cowboy. After that sixty dollars was gone, there might not be any more money coming her way for a long time, since she didn't have a yearling or a big calf left on the ranch. Unless she could get her baby calves branded and then hang onto them . . . .

Vicki stopped short, gaping at a sudden idea. As long as Jim Garry was on her ranch, those outlaws were going to be very, very careful to bother somebody else. It wasn't a permanent answer to the problem and perhaps it was a selfish answer, but this seemed to be a war in which it was every man for himself and the devil take the redhead.

Vicki turned abruptly back toward the house, her fists doubled at her sides. All right, she thought, bobbing her head in vigorous agreement with herself. If Jim Garry wanted a job, she'd give him one. She'd work him plumb down to a frazzled shadow! She'd make him sorry he was ever born!

She entered the front door, stalked through the living room and wheeled into the kitchen like a cow looking for a gate. The room, she saw, was empty—and so were the dishes on the table. For a second Vicki stared at them, absolutely disbelieving that any one man could have put away so much grub.

Then she sailed on out the back door and headed for the corrals, very definitely leading with her chin. No wonder the man had offered to work for grub, she thought in outrage. Nobody short of a millionaire could afford to feed him and pay him wages, too!

As Vicki rounded the corner of the saddle shed, she saw Jim coming out of the corral, leading a couple of horses. Then she saw Nate Travis riding up past the bunkhouse.

Vicki stopped with a gasp. She had forgotten Nate, who was sure to have some pointed ideas about the present set-up. She flashed a quick look at Jim to see him deliberately loosen the gun in his holster before closing the corral gate.

That put the finishing touches on Vicki's goose pimples. For one frozen instant she felt the urge to turn and hightail it for the house. Then she determined to stay and see it through. Maybe she could keep the match from landing smack in the powder keg.

CHAPTER THREE

In Danger—One Heart

AS NATE rode up, Vicki took one look at his set face and stepped quickly forward to meet him, smiling as brightly as she knew how. "Hello, Nate," she called gaily.

"Morning, Vicki," he said without inflection, then looked past her at Jim, who was leaning back against the shoulder of his horse, his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "Sheriffin' gets you out kinda early, doesn't it?" he asked with marked hostility.

"No-o-o," Jim replied. "I wouldn't say it was sheriffin' that did it."

As he spoke, he flicked a glance at Vicki that left no doubt of his meaning. For a second she stared at him, forgetting to close her mouth. Then she turned hastily back to Nate.

"You're out sort of early yourself, aren't you?" she said, striving vainly to speak in an offhand manner.

He nodded briefly. "I rode over to see if Shorty got here all right."

"Oh." Vicki didn't want to say any more, but the steady inquiring light in Nate's eyes forced her on. "Yes, he—got here. He—"

"He decided not to stay," Jim finished for her.

Nate's eyes flashed back to Jim and clung there, narrowing. "How come?"

"Miss Moran didn't need two cowboys," Jim drawled, his very tone a challenge.

Nate looked startled. Then his face turned a dusky red and his right hand, resting on the saddle horn, began to quiver slightly.

"What the hell are you doing out here?" he demanded.

"You had breakfast?" Jim countered, almost pleasantly.

"What's that to you?"

"Nothin'," Jim said bluntly. "I was thinkin' of you. They tell me it's kinda rough to go to hell on an empty stomach, and that's shore where you're gonna wind up if you don't hold that hand still!"

Vicki caught her breath with a sharp gasp. Jim still leaned back against his horse, his thumb hooked in his gunbelt; but the steely light in his eyes told Vicki plainly enough that he meant exactly what he said.

"Wait!" she blurted, starting to step forward.

"You wait," Jim drawled coolly, "and see if that black-headed Romeo's got nerve enough to draw on me. How you bettin' this time, darlin'?"

Vicki managed one more gasp and then quit trying to breathe. She saw the red wash out of Nate's face, leaving it a deadly gray. She saw, too, the terrible effort he was making to control himself. Very slowly he straightened in the saddle, his chest heaving with a ragged breath.

"I wouldn't start a gunfight in front of a woman," he said thickly, "but I'll see you again."

"I'll try to see you at the same time," Jim said significantly. "And now would you mind making a few horse tracks away from here? The little boss and I got work to do."

For what seemed an eternity to Vicki, Nate hesitated, his lips flattened tight across his teeth. Then, as he gathered up the reins, he flashed one glance down at her, a swift, flaming survey that scorched her plumb down to her boots. Without another word, he wheeled his horse and spurred furiously out of the yard.

Vicki was still staring, open-mouthed, at the spot where Nate had disappeared, when a low laugh pulled her around. Jim Garry had one long arm hooked over the neck of his horse and was looking like a school boy who had just planted a tack on the teacher's chair.

"Doggone," he drawled with a delighted grin. "He come near bustin' a blood vessel, didn't he?"

Vicki felt suspiciously as if her own blood vessels were strained to the bursting point. She tried three times before she could manage to drag a deep breath into her lungs. Then she exploded. "What in the devil were you trying to do?" she yelled.

Jim reached nonchalantly to the pocket of his shirt for tobacco and papers, eyeing her with an undisguised devilish expression that made her want to hit something.

"I was just buildin' a little smoke to see which way the wind was blowin'."

"Did you have to build it right under my best friend?"

"Your best friend?" he echoed, startled. "You like that jigger?"

"Certainly I like him," Vicki retorted. "He's the only man in the country who's offered to help me."

"Oh, yeah? How was he going to help?"

"He found that cowboy for me, that Shorty." Thought of Shorty hung a fresh red flag before Vicki's eyes, and she had to grit her teeth to continue. "And he offerd to loan me money. He's trying to do something for me, and you—you dim-witted—"

"So," Jim interrupted thoughtfully, his eyes on the cigarette he was rolling. "He's got you feelin' grateful to him, and he's tryin' to build that into something that counts."

"He's not trying to do anything of the kind!" Vicki was yelling again. "He's a good man, square and above board, which is something you might not understand. I may even marry him!" she finished wildly.

"I doubt that."

Jim's quiet voice, plus the level glance he gave her over the flame of his match, prompted Vicki to stalk up to him with her jaw outthrust and her fists doubled.

"Listen, Bub," she gritted, ramming one rigid forefinger into his chest. "I'm giving the orders around here, and you'll take 'em or I'll beat you plumb down to a nubbin!"

"Oh!" he said, his eyes wide with surprise. "You've decided to hire me, huh?"

"I've decided to let you stay," Vicki corrected, "but I will not have you running my friends off the place. Do you savvy that?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said meekly.

The spark in his eyes, however, was anything but meek; and Vicki swelled up a little more dangerously.

"You had absolutely no business tying into Nate that way, and if he ever comes back here I want you to lay off of him. Do you savvy that?"

"No, ma'am. That is," he added hastily, at her murderous glare, "I savvy about me layin' off of him, but I don't believe he's gonna lay off of me from here on. You wouldn't want me to get my handsome face smashed up, would you? I might lose my appetite."

Vicki's tongue quit her cold. She could only gape at him, watching the good-natured grin spread across his face.

"Maybe we better get to work, huh?" he suggested and turned toward the saddle shed.

FOR once Vicki didn't have a word in her. Something was cutting through her indignation, leaving her more helpless than ever. Jim's imperturbable good humor, that infectious grin. . . .

Vicki rebelled at both, but she didn't get her ideas gathered up until Jim had the horses saddled and turned to her inquiringly.

"You ready to go?"

"Are you sure you've got nerve enough to leave the house?" Vicki asked acidly.

"Nerve enough?"

"Yes. Your famous nerve apparently petered out on you when it came to taking that sheriff's job."

"Oh. Well, I'm shore scared," he said dryly. "Especially since, if I got this thing figured right, this is the most dangerous spot on the range."

"What do you mean by that?"

He grinned again as he handed her the reins to her sorrel. "Just keep your eye on that smoke I built, Red."

For some reason Vicki was definitely uncomfortable as she climbed into her saddle and turned out of the ranch yard. For the first time it occurred to her that maybe Jim Garry had some motive other than a desire to devil her when he helped himself to this riding job.

Vicki shot five sidelong glances at him during the first mile, each time to see him scanning the timbered grassland with a minute care that she knew would record every detail in it. He was tall and easy in the saddle and, except for his keen eyes, as relaxed as if he were sprawled out in some easy chair before a fireplace.

In spite of the rebellion that still churned around inside of Vicki, she became increasingly aware of the man's presence and his forceful personality. She saw that his face grew steadily graver as they passed cow after cow that had obviously lost a calf. Then he pulled abruptly to a halt, narrowly eyeing a line-backed animal that looked as if she'd make a good addition to a dairy herd.

"That cow," he said evenly, "had a *little* calf. Nobody drove that little bugger off."

"Maybe they ate him," Vicki said dryly.

"Yeah, and maybe they just killed him and hid his carcass."

"Who'd do that?" Vicki said. "That's not making money for anybody."

"Includin' you," he said pointedly. "As I get it, these jiggers have been making all the money they needed runnin' off big herds and dynamitin' banks. And they haven't been a damn bit particular who they killed. But you just tell my why they bothered to dispose of your cowboys and pick your calves up one at a time when your whole herd wouldn't be a drop in the bucket they're packin'."

That statement hit Vicki right between the eyes. She didn't like it and she had opened her mouth to say as much when she saw the queer glint in his eye.

"These boys are playin' for big stakes, Vicki," he said quietly, "and you're part of it."

"Me?" she echoed blankly.

"Yeah. As long as you got that stubborn little heart of yours wrapped around this ranch, you're not going to be handin' it out to any man. But if you were broke and had to depend on someone else—"

"Wait," Vicki said, feeling as if she were in the middle of a very black night with a precipice somewhere nearby.

"Let's not wait too long in one spot," he said, lifting his reins to ride on. "I've got an itchy spot between my shoulder blades."

Vicki let her horse drift along beside his as they moved out of the timbered creek bottom and headed across a grassy hollow, but her mind was spinning around like a locoed steer. It had never occurred to her that her ranch and her cows weren't just as valuable as the others that were being attacked; but now she had to admit, in spite of her hot-headed pride, that her outfit *was* a rather small potato in a mighty big kettle.

"But who?" she asked anxiously. "Who'd be pulling a trick like that?"

"Me, maybe." Jim grinned. "I got one kiss, you know, and might do most anything for another." Then he sobered. "I reckon," he said slowly, "I owe you an apology for stringin' you along like I did yesterday. I just couldn't resist it; but, Vicki, that was the nicest thing that's happened to me since I started fightin' other folks' battles for 'em."

He paused, looking down at his saddle horn. However, he apparently was waiting for a strange embarrassment to leave him rather than waiting for Vicki to answer.

"Most people," he went on simply, "figure I haven't got any feelings. Just ice water and a gun hand."

He paused again, lifting his head to

show her a wistfully inquiring expression that turned her heart upside down. Evidently he was wanting her to say that she didn't share in this general opinion, but Vicki's memory of having used those very words herself brought a furious blush to her face and put a tight clamp on her tongue.

For a moment Jim eyed her searchingly. Then he grinned and shook his head.

"Didn't mean to embarrass you, Vicki," he said, in a tone that closed the subject.

Vicki, however, couldn't let it go like that. Impulsively she pulled her horse to a stop and, as Jim also halted, she reached out to put a hand on his arm.

"Jim," she said and got no farther.

She heard the shot ring out behind them. She saw the tight, startled expression that whipped across Jim's face. But before she could fully grasp the meaning of either, Jim's arms flew into the air and his back arched. For a second he seemed to hang poised, straining. Then he fell back onto his horse's rump and slid to the ground as the snorting animal shied away from him.

VICKI froze. For what seemed hours she sat there in stunned horror, staring down at Jim's sprawling body. Then, with a muffled cry, she fell out of her saddle and grabbed his arm.

"Jim!" she cried.

There was no response from him. He had fallen face down, and Vicki tugged furiously to get him over on his back so that she could see his face. She was vaguely aware of the thunder of hoofs fading away into the distance, but at the moment that meant nothing to her.

All she wanted was a chance to finish telling Jim that she didn't think he was just ice water and a gun hand. She wasn't sure what she did think of him, but she was very sure that she wanted to drive that wistful, hurt look out of his eyes.

She got him rolled over and fell to her knees beside him, putting one hand on his cheek as she stared at his closed eyes. She grabbed his shoulder with her free hand and tried to shake him.

"Jim!" she cried again, hardly knowing what she was saying. "Jim, darling!"

Then she became aware all at once that one gray eye had opened and was twinkling to beat hell.

"Jim!" she gasped. "Tell me—are you all right?"

"How could I be all right," he asked solemnly, "when I got such a bad case of heart trouble?"

Before Vicki could begin to digest that remark, he lifted one long arm around her shoulders, pulled her down and proceeded to kiss her with the same driving fervency that had knocked her for a loop the day before. One small part of Vicki's staggering mind told her this was a very strange way for a wounded man to act, but the rest of her mind seemed to think the action was perfectly all right.

It was not until he had released her and she had sagged weakly back on her spurs that Vicki remembered there were such things as bushwhackers in this delicious, dizzy world.

"Where'd he hit you?" she asked tremulously.

"He didn't, but I didn't see any point in lettin' him try it again." Jim sat up, eyeing her with a queer mixture of gravity and incredulity. "Do you realize what you called me?"

Vicki had to wait one brief moment for her ideas to catch up with her. Then she blew up. "Do you realize what I'd *like* to call you?" she demanded wrathfully. "Scaring me half to death! I ought to beat you black and blue!"

"Maybe you ought," he conceded, "but you wouldn't attack an injured man, would you?"

"The only injury you've got," Vicki blazed, "is in your head!"

"Mebbeso." He scratched that head dubiously. "You know, you sort of declared war when you sidled up to me there in the

store yesterday. I'm just helpin' you fight the battles, thassall."

"Oh-h-h!"

Vicki jumped to her feet and stalked after her sorrel, acutely aware that Jim had shoved up and was ambling after her, grinning like a happy ape. That settled it, she told herself flatly. He'd never had anything in that empty head of his except a desire to heckle her. She wouldn't stand for it any longer!

"And that," he drawled, as he picked up his trailing reins, "is the way the wind's a-blowin'."

"This wind," Vicki said flatly, "just quit blowing. You can count me out of your little games from here on."

"It's a game, all right," he admitted, swinging into his saddle, "and the feller that gets tagged is apt to have a damn nice funeral. Would you come to mine?"

Vicki reined away without answering, but she couldn't help the cold shiver that ran through her. Nor could she forget, in spite of her conviction that Jim Garry was endeavoring mostly to make a fool of her, that that rifle slug hadn't been fooling.

Jim took the lead on the way back to the ranch; and Vicki noted that he made it a point to stick to heavy cover, often circling far out of his way in order to stay in thick brush and trees. Well, she couldn't blame him for that. He had said he had an itchy spot between his shoulder blades, and Vicki had a crawly hunch that he had known who was going to try to scratch it.

She kept her mouth shut, however, tagging along behind him like a doubting, fearing—and curious—shadow. Jim reined in on the timbered knoll behind the ranch, scanning the layout with minute care.

"I reckon," he murmured finally, "that they're all in town by now, waitin' to be surprised by the news that Mrs. Garry's little boy Jimmy just went to hell. Well, we'll give 'em something to be surprised about."

With that thought-provoking remark, he reined on down toward the corrals, Vicki still tagging him in silence.

It was after noon when they got in, but Vicki had no desire for food. She went straight to the house, found herself a trail to follow around the kitchen table and proceeded to use it, pacing restlessly and trying to put her mind on all the provocative remarks Jim had dropped during the morning.

She found, however, that her perverse mind would not stay off the man himself. Whether she liked the idea or not, she had to admit that those kisses of his had done some damage to her heart that might prove irreparable.

CHAPTER FOUR

No Truce

SHE had no idea how long she had been battling her thoughts when Jim knocked at the back door and came on in without waiting for an invitation. For a moment he hesitated, eyeing her steadily; and Vicki felt her face go hot as she realized that he was reading all those thoughts that she didn't even want to read herself.

"Well?" she demanded defiantly.

"I reckon," he said slowly, "that you've had time to get me home by now."

Vicki's defiance didn't stand a chance. "Huh?"

"I'm bad hurt, Vicki," he told her seriously. "In fact I'm down, plumb helpless; but I'll get well if you can get the doctor out here quick enough. Only you won't need to bring him at all. You see?"

"Oh, yes," Vicki said with a vague, airy gesture. "You want a brain specialist, huh?"

Jim laughed. "Probably could use one, at that, but here's the deal, Vicki. Whoever took that shot at me awhile ago is plumb interested in goin' to my funeral. If he thought I was out here alone and unable to put up a fight, the chances are darn good

that he'd come boilin' out here to finish the job. Especially," he added, "if he thought you cared whether or not I got planted."

Vicki looked that idea over very carefully, and something about it gave her the willies. "You're setting a trap," she said narrowly, "for Nate Travis."

"Thought you said he was a friend of yours."

"He is."

"You in the habit of makin' friends with a jigger who'd murder a helpless man in cold blood?"

"Certainly not!" Vicki said hotly. "Nate wouldn't pull a trick like that!"

"Then you don't need to worry about him. The only man—or men—who'll take the bait in this trap are the ones who've been committin' murder around here right and left—and who are anxious right now to commit another one."

That made sense, but still Vicki hesitated, eying him uncertainly.

"Look, Vicki," he said, and for once he was in dead earnest. "The only reason I didn't take that star in town was because I figured I could do the job quicker out here. I already know who I'm after, but I haven't got the proof against them and I might not be able to get it in weeks. If they come after me, that'll be proof enough, won't it?"

Vicki nodded, feeling suddenly, strangely sick. She had rebelled at the thought that Jim Garry would turn down a law job just to come gallivanting after her, but she didn't like to think that he hadn't been gallivanting any of the time.

"We've got a chance," he went on, "to nail this business down tonight, to break the outfit that's been breakin' everybody else. But I've got to have your help."

Vicki pulled in a slow breath and found that she no longer gave a hang whether they broke that outfit or not. "What do you want me to do?" she asked dully.

Jim hesitated, eyeing her sharply. Then he plunged. "Go to the doctor's house first thing and tell him to hide out. That'll give you an excuse to hunt all over town for him and do a thorough job of spreading the word that I've been shot. It ought to be dark by then. You decide to ride to Stockton after a doctor and hightail it out of town, but don't come back here!"

Vicki shivered at the dark meaning in his words, but she only nodded.

"There's one other thing," he said slowly. "I don't know what you think of me, but I'm still playing the hunch that you're part of the stakes in this game. Could you give the impression that you—cared a lot whether or not I kicked the bucket?"

"I could try," Vicki said, getting a good deal of acid into her voice in spite of the unaccustomed weight of her heart. "You're helpless and I'm frantic. Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it. I—" Jim started to step toward her, lifting a hand and looking at her queerly. Then he dropped his hand and stepped back. "I've saddled a fresh horse for you."

"Thanks," Vicki said. She strode past him to the door, but there she paused. "I presume," she said, somewhat bitingly, "that you're hungry. Help yourself, but try to remember that a sick man is supposed to eat lightly, will you?"

With that, she let herself out of the house, stalked to the bay horse and climbed into the saddle without looking back. Now that the end of this reign of terror was in sight, Vicki Moran, for some idiotic reason, wanted to cry.

She wasn't very fond of herself at the moment. She had wondered what would happen if some gal waltzed up and planted a kiss on the indomitable Jim Garry, and she had found out. The gal got the worst of it.

Vicki tore into town like a Comanche on the warpath, aware of the stir she caused as she ran her lathered horse down the length of main street and threw herself from the saddle in front of the doctor's house. She had to make some fast tracks to get into the house before the doctor got out of it, but

she met him just inside the door and shoved him hastily back into the room.

"I've got a patient," she blurted, "who doesn't want to see you. Will you keep out of sight?"

The doctor removed his spectacles, wiped them carefully on his sleeve and put them back on, still squinting at her in bewilderment. "You feel al right, Vicki?"

"No," Vicki said, "but I haven't got time to go into my symptoms."

Hurriedly she explained what Jim Garry wanted and why, and the old doctor nodded in swift approval.

"I've been wanting," he said, "to take a nap for three years."

WITH that detail taken care of, Vicki started back up the street, going into every establishment except the saloons in her futile search for the doctor. She was out of breath and running rapidly out of patience by the time she reached Jeff White's general store.

Nate Travis met her on the porch, reaching anxiously for her hand. "Vicki, what's up?"

"Somebody shot Jim Garry." Vicki managed to keep the half hysterical note in her voice. "I've got to find the doctor!"

"Is he bad hurt?" Nate asked sharply.

"Awful bad," Vicki said, "although I think he'll get well if I can only find that blasted medico quick enough. Maybe Jeff knows where he went."

Jeff didn't, but he was inclined to be indifferent about it. "He'll be back after a bit," he said, his voice so dry it bordered on sarcasm.

Vicki divined that the townsmen didn't thank Jim Garry for walking out on the job they had offered him and would lift no hand to help him—and Jim must have known that. Impulsively she opened her lips to defend the man and his actions but remembered just in time that such a defense would throw a handful of monkey wrenches into Jim's machinery. Instead she glanced nervously out the window at the gathering dusk.

"I can't wait," she said anxiously. "Jim's lying out there alone, unable to lift a hand. Where *could* that doctor have gone?"

"I heard yesterday," Jeff said idly, "that Mrs. Thompson was sick again. Maybe he's out there."

"I'll go see."

As she whirled toward the door, Nate stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Take it easy, Vicki," he said soothingly. "That high-handed lawdog's been asking for it for a long time, anyway. No use wearin' yourself out."

"But, Nate," Vicki protested, unreasonably resenting the fact that nobody in this town seemed to give a hoot about Mrs. Garry's little boy Jimmy. "I can't let him lie out there and die!"

"What do you care?" Nate asked jealously. "He's nothing to you, is he?"

Vicki opened her lips to answer that question, but no words came out. Then Vicki discovered that the word yes wanted to pop out of its own accord, and a fiery blush flew into her face.

It was answer enough for Nate.

"I see!" he said harshly, stepping back to glare at her. Then, after a long moment, he shrugged resignedly. "All right, Vicki. If that's the way you feel about it, I'll help you find that damn doctor."

Vicki squeezed his arm. "Thanks, Nate. If I can't find the doctor here, I'll have to ride to Stockton. I've just got to do something."

She turned quickly out of the store, telling herself vehemently that that was the last lie she was going to tell on this night. She got her bay and galloped out of town toward the Thompson place, but once in the deep shelter of the trees she pulled up. No use actually looking for the little man she knew wasn't going to be there.

It was while she was sitting there waiting for the necessary time to elapse that she saw two riders swing away from the edge

of town and ride quietly off toward her ranch. It was quite dark now, but Vicki distinctly recognized the slight, stooped form of Shorty. The man with him, a long willowy proposition, was a stranger to her.

Vicki's breath all left her at once in a soundless whoosh of relief. They, then, were the guilty ones! Vicki hadn't wanted to admit that somewhere in the back of her mind was a nagging doubt of Nate Travis. Now it was all very clear.

Shorty had been posing as a rider in need of a job while he no doubt looked over the herds he wanted to appropriate. No wonder Jim didn't want the little man hanging around Vicki! In spite of Vicki's resolutions on the subject of Jim Garry, she could not help the warm glow that stole through her at the realization that Jim had wasted no time in booting the little outlaw off her ranch.

Then the glow faded out into a cold weight somewhere inside her. The men Jim wanted were walking into the trap like a couple of sheep. After tonight his job in this country would be done and he would no doubt be riding on to some other equally hazardous task.

The thought left Vicki lower than the bottom rock in a creek and she reined back toward town, wanting to see Nate again before she "left for Stockton." If ever a girl needed reassurance that she was wanted by *somebody,* that girl was Vicki.

She expected to find Nate back at the store, but Jeff was alone, poring over an account book as he figured up the day's business. He looked up without interest as Vicki entered.

"Find him?"

Vicki shook her head.

"Nate couldn't find him either, so I reckon you'll have to go to Stockton all right. Nate said to tell you he'd make the ride for you only he promised the old man he'd have that dynamite out there this evenin'."

"Dynamite!" Vicki echoed, jumping at the sound of her own voice.

"Sure. They been usin' quite a bit of the stuff on that dam they're building."

That was no secret, but for some reason the information this time hit Vicki like the kick of a mule. Perhaps it was the crack Jim had made about the bandits dynamiting banks, or perhaps it was just her own jumpy nerves that made her susceptible to wild ideas.

"Has Nate gone home?" she demanded.

Jeff nodded. "Left about fifteen minutes ago. What the hell's bitin' you?"

"A bug," Vicki said, whirling toward the door. "A horrible bug."

VICKI couldn't get into her saddle fast enough. She was remembering with breathtaking clarity that it had been Nate who had sent Shorty out to her ranch in the first place. Remembering, too, that Jim hadn't actualy denied that it was Nate he was setting the trap for. He had said merely that if Nate were above murder Vicki didn't need to worry about him.

Well, it wasn't Nate Vicki was worried about as she tore out of town to the spot where she had seen Shorty and the stranger. She dismounted swiftly to light a match and scan the trail. Only the two sets of horse tracks, but Vicki still wasn't satisfied. That horrible bug was biting her like sixty, and she climbed back on her horse and rode another mile before again dismounting to examine the trail.

This time there were three sets of tracks, and Vicki's uncertainty went up in a blaze of panic. With a muffled cry of terror, she threw herself into her saddle.

Jim Garry would never be expecting dynamite. He would be hiding in the bunkhouse, waiting for the bandits to sneak in to finish the job. Hiding perhaps with a gun in his hand; but that gun would do him no good if those bandits, who had become notorious for their abiilty to move with the silent stealth of shadows, sneaked up to plant a charge of dynamite under the building.

Vicki had the little bay leveled out, already running a good deal faster than he could normally go, but still she spurred him ruthlessly. It didn't matter what Jim Garry thought of her. The only thing that mattered now was that she could no longer argue with herself about what she thought of him.

The ranch was fearfully dark as she splashed across the creek and thundered into the yard. She circled the main house, her straining eyes fastened on the dark bulk of the bunkhouse, and was about to yell a warning when the bay stumbled hard over some unseen obstacle.

The horse didn't go clear down, but Vicki flew over his head like a tumbleweed before a high wind. She lost most of her wind in the fall but she scrambled to her feet and started running, using what breath she had left in a frantic scream.

"Jim! Get out of the bunkhouse!"

The words had barely left her when the world blew up. She was aware of a blinding light, a terrific explosion of sound, but she was too busy flying backward to grasp the full meaning of what had happened. Then she landed with a jarring crash that knocked the last of her wind completely out of her.

For an indefinite period Vicki's senses were fully occupied with the roaring in her head and the terrible ache in her chest. She finally managed to drag a little air into her lungs and she struggled to get up, wondering vaguely what had happened to all her arms and legs. She still hadn't located her own arms when a couple of strange ones closed around her, pulling her up hard against a heaving chest.

"Vicki, are you all right?"

Vicki recognized that voice, which meant that she certainly was all right for several moments before she could get wind enough to say so.

"What in the hell," Jim demanded, his voice rough with an emotion apparently strange to him, "was the idea of bargin' back out here?"

"Dynamite," Vicki gasped. "You couldn't have been expecting that."

"But I was, Vicki, bless your heart. I was waiting outside and was just ready to nab 'em when you yelled and pulled the trigger on the whole deal. That bunkhouse," he added with anxious regret, "is a mess."

Vicki wasn't worried about the bunkhouse. She was far more concerned about the fact that Jim was still holding her and didn't act as if he intended to let go. Which meant that Vicky was in no hurry to show him that she was completely recovered.

"Your friend Travis," Jim said, eyeing her doubtfully, "had a wreck. Only his name wasn't Travis."

"It wasn't?" Vicki said, and she couldn't scare up any concern about that either.

"I recognized him yesterday, but he apparently didn't realize that I knew anything about him. He was an ex-convict from New Mexico, Vicki, and his specialty was dynamite. When I learned the setup here, I just looked around to see what Travis was really after and moved out here."

Vicki felt again that sickish disappointment over the fact that Jim was still attending merely to business. She started to shove away from him but got exactly nowhere. His arms tightened.

"I'm going to have to stick around," he said, once more elaborately grave, "at least long enough to rebuild that bunkhouse. What do you reckon? Should we sign a truce or do you want to continue this war?"

Vicki caught her breath. That didn't sound like business! "If you'll keep on helping me fight the battles—"

That was as far as she got before the next battle was launched. Vicki got her arms around his neck and hung on for dear life, sure now that this war was going to last a long, long time.

THE END

Record Wrangling

By ARIZONA BLAKE

HOWDY, tophands. It's high time to break into your piggy bank for the dinero to round up those Christmas gifts for the folks. And just to make the choosing of those presents plumb easy, I've trotted through the new herd of wax offerings and dabbed a wide loop on the records that are just right for Mom, Pop, big brother, sis and the younkers.

So pull up an easy chair and get ready for some right simple Christmas shopping —and some mighty pleasant listening.

AN AMERICAN IN PARIS
***Album* with Gene Kelly (MGM)**

Again MGM hits the jackpot—and gives you a Christmas bonanza for the whole family, with its album of recordings directly from the soundtrack of their new technicolor musical based on George Gershwin's wonderful melodies.

For ballet fans, there are four whole sides of the longest ballet sequence yet filmed. It's based directly on Gershwin's symphonic tone poem, "An American In Paris." You can just bet your best boots that when Gene Kelly dances to this exuberant score, even the rafters clap.

"Legs" Kelly isn't kidding when he warbles I GOT RHYTHM on the A side of this track, and on another recording he's even more persuasive, singing LOVE IS HERE TO STAY. Gallic Georges Guetary does a Franco-American duet with Kelly and 'S WONDERFUL! And to round out the album, the French star solos on I'LL BUILD A STAIRWAY TO PARADISE.

DAVID ROSE PLAYS THE MUSIC OF GEORGE GERSHWIN
***Album* (MGM)**

Christmas-timed for big sister, as well as all the folks who grow sentimental just hearing Gershwin's name, is this three-speed album of memorable Gershwin tunes. Themes from AN AMERICAN IN PARIS and RHAPSODY IN BLUE, as well as songs like LIZA, SUMMERTIME and EMBRACEABLE YOU make this a delightful collection.

And if you want to spark that reluctant petticoat's interest, get her within listening range of another song in the collection, LOVE IS HERE TO STAY.

TRA-LA-LA
ANOTHER HUMAN BEING OF THE OPPOSITE SEX
By Russell Nype (MGM)

"Hum it, sing it, drum it, what a thrill I'm getting from it, TRA-LA-LA" sings Broadway's popular Russell Nype, and since it's the happy-go-lucky warble Gersh-

win wrote for waddies in love, just keep it away from that buzzard who's a success with the squaws, or you'll hear him whistling it all the time, it's that catchy.

The coupling is the most recent of a long line of tributes to the cow bunnies. This jigger has lots of likes, "but most of all," he sings, "I like to look through my specs at ANOTHER HUMAN BEING OF THE OPPOSITE SEX." And who can blame him?

NAGGIN' ALBUQUERQUE POLKA
by Rex Allen (Mercury)

If you've heard the ramrod of your ranch complaining about the tongue-whipping he's always getting from his ball-and-chain, the lyrics Rex Allen mouths here won't be new to you, for they're about a female who's NAGGIN' so much, he wonders "if her mouth is asbestos-lined." And in that case, it's no toss-up as to who'll appreciate this platter.

The pairing is, naturally, a polka, guaranteed to bounce you right out of your blues. Rex explains the tricky lyrics—first you spell the name of Albuquerque, "and then spell it backwards. . . . That's the ALBUQUERQUE POLKA."

GOD'S RADIO PHONE HE'S PASSING THIS WAY
by Wade Mainer (King)

Mom, the mainspring of the home, generally goes for sacred songs, and here's a couple that are more than timely. Full of faith and trust, Wade Mainer chants, "Call a station in heaven, they will answer I'm sure . . . over GOD'S wonderful RADIO PHONE."

The disk-mate assures you that HE'S PASSING THIS WAY TODAY, while the chorale joins in to urge you to "ever stand ready to throw your burdens away." Wade Mainer composed both sides himself.

SHOW BOAT
Album by MGM

Yes, MGM has produced a revival in technicolor of the immortal SHOW BOAT, and for your listening pleasure has put an album of its superlative music directly from the sound-track. Here's musical entertainment every jasper will enjoy.

William Warfield offers a powerful version of "Ol' Man River." Ava Gardner does a remarkable vocal on "Bill" and the ever-poignant "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," while dueting Kathryn Grayson and Howard Keel sing the lovely "Why Do I Love You," "Make Believe," and "You Are Love" in a way everyone will enjoy. And for humor, bend an ear to lively Marge and Gower Champion frolicing through "Life Upon the Wicked Stage" and "I Might Fall Back on You."

TRAIL DUST

Virile-voiced Tennessee Ernie won't be a greenhorn on the screen once he finishes his technicolor Western, "Man In The Saddle." . . . Mario Lanza made made BE MY LOVE so popular it's going to be the title of a movie, with lush-voiced Mario, naturally.

Bob Hope called the song title HOW COULD YOU BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY THAT I LOVED YOU WHEN YOU KNOW I'VE BEEN A LIAR ALL MY LIFE? a "filibuster with music." Now Eddie Dean rambles along with a new record. Its name—I MARRIED THE GIRL WHO CAUGHT THE BOUQUET AT THE WEDDING OF THE GIRL I LOVED. Need we say more?

THE WORLD IS MINE TONIGHT TILL THE SANDS OF THE DESERT GROW COLD
by Alfred Drake (Decca)

Here's a Specialty Series release that

ought to suit any waddy, even though he ordinarily prefers Hank Snow to "long-haired" platters. Alfred Drake, who first became famous when he sang and acted the cowboy role of Curly in the stage play "Oklahoma", sings thrillingly "THE WORLD IS MINE TONIGHT. . . . You're mine and mine alone, two lips that speak of love." On the other side of the record, his pear-shaped tones vow that "Till the mysteries of heaven unfold" his love will remain constant.

COME ON-A MY HOUSE
JUST IN CASE
by Kay Armen (Federal)

Did you cowpunchers know that the famous playwright William Saroyan paired up with Ross Bagdasarian to compose that catchy humdinger, COME ON-A MY HOUSE? It's an invitation few can resist, especialy with Kay Armen singing her original version which made the song a hit.

Soft as velvet, she warbles a bang-up waltz on the sister side of the recording.

IN THE COOL, COOL, COOL OF THE EVENING
BONNE NUIT
by Dean Martin (Capitol)

In his newest motion picture, Bing Crosby sings these two tuneful songs, and on the Capitol waxing, Dean Martin takes over ably. IN THE COOL, COOL, COOL OF THE EVENING has the happy-go-lucky flavor of an earlier hit, BUTTONS AND BOWS, while BONNE NUIT (Good Night) is a warm little heartthrob of a ballad.

ALBUM ROUNDUP

MGM has come up with a cavvy of albums to suit all tastes. Interested in romance-evoking music? Here's GYPSY AIRS by Harry Horlick and his orchestra. From the flashing urgency of the "Czardas Monti" to the sultry spell of "Dark Eyes," you'll like his colorful music.

Or are you in the mood for classical music? MACKLIN MORROW CONDUCTS is the name of his recorded concert of popular classical music. Here's Edith Piaf's "La Vie En Rose" and Manual deFalla's sensuous "Danza Espanola," the swirling "Rosenkavalier Waltzes" by Richard Strauss and the provoking Offenbach "Can-Can," among others. (MGM).

Or maybe you're a maverick who likes ballet music. MGM thoughtfully provides SLAUGHTER ON TENTH AVENUE, an album which contains not only the dramatically intense title ballet, but also more standard offerings from the ballet-lover's repertoire, including the sprightly polka rhythms of Smetana's "Bartered Bride," the ever-familiar "Faust Fantasy," the glittering glissandos of Fritz Kreisler's "Liebesfreud," and the ballet music from Judy Garland and Gene Kelly's motion picture "The Pirate."

Still bent on a light classical spree? Here are the SONGS OF OLEY SPEAKS. (MGM). Macklin Morrow again conducting, this time the universally popular compositions of the Ohioan artist, while his songbird niece Margaret Speaks and the famous operatic star Richard Bonelli sing, respectively, "Sylvia" and the rousing "On The Road to Mandalay." These and the other selections in the album constitute a fine tribute to a fine composer.

RICH, YOUNG AND PRETTY is how MGM brands its album of songs from the new screen musical. Pert and provocative are its lyrics "L'Amour Toujours" and "We Never Talk Much," previously released on a single record with Jane Powell. Here Danielle Darrieux, with an assist from Fernando Lamas, do the honors, just as they did in the film. But the star of the show, Jane Powell, solos effectively on some other numbers, including the atmospheric "Dark Is The Night." Incidentally, the way Parisian Danielle and debonair Fernando sing "We Never Talk Much," words aren't necessary.

I LOVE THE SUNSHINE OF YOUR SMILE
SENTIMENTAL FOOL
by The Four Knights (Capitol)

Since Vaughn Monroe roared "Sound Off," the songsmiths have been giving out with march novelties. I LOVE THE SUNSHINE OF YOUR SMILE isn't the kind of song a hospital patient getting ready to undergo an operation might select (although we hear that one Chicago hospital offers a wide range of tunes along with anesthesia), but it's a dynamic performance you'll probably want to hear more of.

WINNING SPINNERS

All you need is one listen to Terry Gilkyson's HOOFBEAT SERENADE, where "you're in rhythm with your mount . . . as the wind goes rushing by" and the atmospheric FAST FREIGHT, written by Terry himself with the urgent power of a folk song as he chants of the lure of the railroad—"hear the whistle blow . . . if you go you can't come back." You'll want to latch onto these excellent Decca sides.

Fiddlin' Red Herron browns up an authentic folk song, "Git along home, CINDY" for Federal . . . Evelyn Knight and Red Foley do Decca proud with their rendition of the flavorful CRAWDAD SONG and the admonishing IDLE RUMORS . . . Moon Mullican carols for King that LOVE IS THE LIGHT THAT LEADS ME HOME, back to "the only friends I had" . . . Billy Eckstine makes that old needle hum with his lush renditions of PANDORA, a lyric with poetic inspiration, and WONDER WHY, from the MGM film "Rich, Young and Pretty." . . . Capitol's Jan Garber vocalizes dolefully about a couple who never met because she lived on THE MORNINGSIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN and he on "the twilight side of the hill" . . . A turntable hit in 1943, COW COW BOOGIE is back with Ella Mae Morse whooping it up this time . . . Hank Williams of MGM, who gallops high in the hearts of this column's readers, as your letters constantly show, courts a sagehen in HEY, GOOD LOOKIN' . . .

RIGHT FOR THE BUTTONS

Capitol has a brand new line-up of tunes for the younkers that'll make them behave from Christmas to New Year's Day, so get ready to fill their stockings!

TWEETY'S PUDDY TAT TWOUBLE is an album reader about the lisping canary. This time he takes a fling in the park—and lands in the zoo with Sylvester the cat giving him a merry chase. These further adventures of Tweety—I taw a puddy tat!—fame will delight any youngster, while the picture-reader book is a colorful bonus.

Almost as good as going on a picnic oneself is listening to Walter Lantz' cheerful WOODY WOODPECKER'S PICNIC (Capitol). "The woodpeckin'est woodpecker that ever pecked a peck o' wood" is Woody Woodpecker, as he carols an invitation to all the woodland animals to join him on a picnic. There's Tommy Turtle, who makes good soup, and the possum who's bringing an upside-down cake, and many more animals the younger set will find hilarious.

That's the gift list and the platter gab for this time, pardners. I'll be back next issue with a new roundup of records and trail gossip, and with the results of the contest to find your favorite singer. There's still a chance to enter your choice, but send it in on a postcard pronto.

And keep the howdies coming to *Record Wrangling,* c/o Rangeland Love Stories, Popular Publications, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, New York.

Adios for now, pardners.

LOVE'S LOST OUTPOST

"W-e-l-l." The drawled word of reproof came from the half darkness inside.

Copyright 1944 by Popular Publications, Inc., under the title: "Little Hellcat of Hat Creek."

By Ben T. Young

Barbara had to play a lonely waiting game in her wilderness stage station —and gamble that her man would propose just once more!

WHEN a band of Ogallala Sioux from the Pine Ridge Agency raided the Hat Creek stage-station horse corrals, it never occurred to Barbara Ballard, the station-keeper's daughter, to cower under a bed. Snatching up her father's hot-barreled Winchester—because he wouldn't

need it any more—she sniped a Sioux from his plunging pony's back. She kept right on throwing lead until the surviving Indians fled.

Nor, because old Titus Ballard was dead, had Barbara any intention of seeking shelter with relatives on the safer side of the Missouri River. She was too dependent for that. Besides, she didn't intend to lose sight of Wade Cooper, the young ex-cavalry officer who ran cattle over along Lance Creek. Other than being gravely courteous, as he was to everyone, Wade had never paid her the slightest heed. However, maybe if she just stayed around long enough . . .

"Why shouldn't I stay here and run this place?" she countered when, directly after the forlorn little funeral, Wade had asked about her plans. "I've got to make a living, and this is the only work I know. I can do it."

"I don't doubt your capability," he protested quietly, standing in the doorway ready to leave. "But, as you see, a stage station on the Deadwood-Cheyenne road isn't the safest place in the world, especially for a girl. Perhaps if you have no close relatives and want to stay in this country, you'd better marry me. I'm just getting a start, and you wouldn't be too comfortable in the kind of wickiup I could build now, but—"

"Thanks, Wade," she said. Impulsively she laid a small brown hand on his arm, lean and hard under the sleeve. "You're just being kind. Run along, now, and forget it. And thanks for all you've done."

He didn't say any more, just strode out to his waiting bay, swung aboard and touched the brim of his gray Stetson as he reined away from the hitch-rail. While he grew smaller in the distance against the setting sun, Barbara continued to watch. When he'd disappeared she made a quick dab at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Darn!" she swore to herself. "If only he really loved me! But he's a man's man and doesn't want a wife any more than I want a poodle dog. He's just living up to his code as an officer and gentleman—a lady in distress and all that. Maybe he'll never love me—but until he does I'll go it alone."

However, her plans for going it alone at Hat Creek promptly smacked up against a knot.

"No girl can run this stage station," scoffed hard-eyed Ed Burkholder, the division agent who lived at Deadwood and wanted the Hat Creek job for a brother-in-law. "This place needs a man with whiskers."

Jim Claiborne, who made his headquarters at Fort Laramie down on the Platte and ran the whole works, nodded his head in agreement.

"Listen," Barbara said desperately. "I was born and raised down at La Bonte, when Dad ran that station for the Overland people. I've been up here eight years and know every detail of the business. Let me try it. Please."

Claiborne didn't answer right then, just sat studying her square little chin, level hazel eyes and coppery hair. Barbara was holding her breath. Finally Claiborne spoke. "All right, we'll try it for three months. If we're not satisfied by then—"

"We won't be," Burkholder promised, biting angrily at his yellow mustache. "Come some night when a gold shipment has to lay over here, and bandits will take it like the Indians took Custer."

Claiborne had been looking at the square capable-looking hands that Barbara kept clasped in her lap, and maybe he was remembering what Timberline Jones, the stock-keeper and blacksmith, had just told him about the sudden end of a certain Sioux Indian.

"We'll try it," Claiborne repeated. "The financial arrangements, Miss Ballard, will remain as they were with your father. You'll get a monthly lump sum to pay yourself and your helpers a salary, buy feed and other necessary supplies aside from food and bedding. As always, the keeper sells

meals and lodging as a side-line—and keeps the profits, if any."

"Thanks." Rising, Barbara took the hand he offered. "I'll make a go of it or bust trying."

ALL of that happened in April, and by the last of May she was making a go of it. Old-timers along the route could hardly believe it was the old Hat Creek station. Not that Titus Ballard hadn't been good at his job. He had. But so long as the teams were well fed and properly shod, and facilities were available for repairing a coach wheel or a bit of harness, he hadn't seen the need for bothering about frills. "Hell," he'd always drawled when better food and sleeping arrangements had been suggested. "This is Wyoming, not the Union Pacific Hotel in Omaha."

Now, though, it was different. Weeds no longer grew from the sod roofs of the buildings, and no wind-driven sand sifted through the stone-and-log walls. Diners no longer howled at paying a dollar a meal, because Barbara had imagination and used it. Potatoes could be hauled in as cheaply as beans; ammunition with which to shoot prairie chickens, sage hens and antelope was cheaper than salt pork; corn bread was as easily made as indigestible soda-biscuits; and as for pies—well, raisin pies, vinegar pies and prune pies were as easily put together as those of the everlasting dried apples. And as soon as the wild plums and chokecherries were ripe, they would go in Barbara's pies, too.

Also worth a dollar now was a night's lodging. For while Piute Pearce hadn't been any great shakes as a cook, he was really a heller with adz, axe and masons' trowel, and he had whipped up two tight cabins with stout bunks of cottonwood logs. A tired traveler got his eight bits' worth.

The infrequent female guests, mostly blowsy dance-hall gals bound from one joint to another, exclaimed about the flowers beginning to bloom out front, and the curtains made of laundered grain-sacks at the small-paned windows. They also admired Barbara's slender but sturdy figure openly; and one particularly outspoken gal said that Barbara was wasting her time in that dump.

Barbara hoped she wasn't. She'd been too busy to think much about it. But now and again, before she dropped off to sleep, she would lie listening to the coyotes yelp and wonder if Wade Cooper wasn't about due to ride that way. Up till now he'd probably been occupied with the calf roundup. But that was over. Even if he didn't give a whoop-and-a-holler about her, just plain inquisitiveness as to how she was making out should bring him.

"He hasn't even the curiosity of a normal human," she fretted as June ended. "He's as cold and self-sufficient as that glacier over in the Big Horns." It didn't occur to her that she was apparently self-sufficient too—alarmingly so.

Finally, Wade Cooper did show up on a hot day after both coaches had nooned there and gone on. Timberline was still working on the twelve sweat-stained horses that had finished their day's chore. Piute was chopping firewood outside the kitchen door. Inside, Barbara, and the homesteader's widow she'd hired as cook, were finishing the dishes.

Cooper appeared in the doorway from the dining room, filling the six-foot opening from sill to lintle.

Barbara's heart jumped like a spooked mule-deer. "Hello!" she said, tossing aside the dish towel.

Bowing gravely to both women, Cooper backed into the dining room. Barbara snatched off her apron and followed. Cooper hung his hat on one of the pegs beside the door.

"From everything I hear you're doing all right," he said. "I'm glad. Could I be of any help?"

Instinctively Barbara stiffened. "No, but thanks," she said, turning to one side—when she really wanted to lay her weary

head against his chest and feel his arms about her.

From a drawer she took her new ledger, opened it on the long trestle table. "Look," she invited. "Last month, in spite of extra expense for blankets, bed-sacks and things, I broke even. This month I'll show a profit of maybe a hundred dollars besides my salary. And when the new vegetable garden—"

"Vegetable garden!"

"Yes. Down by the creek. We'll have a crop which should increase my profits."

Wade's gray eyes showed admiration, but the sort of admiration he'd show for another man. "You'll own this stage-line yet," he smiled, lowering himself to one of the rope-seated chairs.

AS HE examined the neat entries in the ledger, she stood beside him hungrily breathing in the clean man-smell of soap, leather and tobacco. It was all she could do to keep from touching the well-shaped black head, putting a soft arm across his wide shoulders—but she didn't dare. Why, of all the men who so obviously wanted to touch her, should this one not want to? He was as impersonal as a fence-post.

"Very good," he said after a moment, closing the book. "Wish I were as good a manager. I see now what a conceited chump I was, offering you help. Well—" Glancing out a west window at the darkening sky, he reached for his hat.

"Don't go!" The impulsive plea made her flush, and at once she was reserved again. "Come see the pilgrims' cabins." *If,* she thought hurriedly, *I can keep him till that storm hits, maybe he'll stay to supper.*

"Hi, Wade," Piute grinned as they passed the woodpile. "What d'you hear from the general?"

"He's fine, thanks."

"What general?" Barbara wanted to know as they walked on.

"My father, who is retired now," Wade said. "Piute was in his brigade in '63."

Barbara felt her heart grow weary. How little she knew of this man she hoped would want to marry her. Probably his people were top-lofty folks who would have none of her. Perhaps Wade was the same way.

All the warmth had gone out of her. It was gone out of the air, too. It was chill and the sky was as dark as her new mood. A jagged streak of lightning jabbed at the earth and thunder rolled like cannon fire. She said tonelessly, "Women up here in this cabin, men down yonder. No separate rooms, just a long hall with bunks."

Wade nodded. "Good enough. Better than the quarters I share with my hands. Now, if—" His voice was lost in the sudden rush of wind and rain. Grasping her arm, he hurried her toward the door of the nearest cabin. Before they reached it they were soaked.

Barbara's thin cotton dress now only accentuated what it was intended to conceal, and she thought of but one thing—to snatch a blanket from the nearest bunk and cover herself. As Wade leaped over the threshold she tripped. He caught her. For an instant she was utterly confused. Then she realized that she was in his arms. Was he merely being polite, holding her till she steadied herself? Should she thrust him off and snatch that blanket?

"W-e-l-l." The drawled word of reproof came from the half-darkness inside.

They jumped apart as though a hot branding iron had been thrust between them.

Rising from the nearest bunk a man approached. It was Burkholder, the division agent. "Dealing from the bottom of the deck, I see," he said to Barbara, raising his voice to be heard above the storm.

Added color flared in her cheeks. It was anger, but it might have looked like guilt. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

Burkholder didn't answer her. Instead, he turned to Wade. "Don't let her fool you, Cooper—if she is fooling you. Anyway, keep off my range."

Wade's eyes were like pistol balls. "I wasn't aware—"

Barbara had been aghast at Burkholder's implication, but now she got her breath. "He's lying, Wade!" she burst out.

"Listen, Cooper." Burkholder wasn't going to give Wade a second to puzzle this out. "I'm not one to argue. Use your head. Why do you suppose a soft snap like this Hat Creek job fell into a woman's lap when all she's got is looks? I'm not Santa Claus. From the story I've heard, a pretty gal fooled you once. Don't be fooled again."

With a stricken look at Barbara, Wade turned and walked out.

She opened her mouth to call him back, but no sound came. Pride stopped her. Even to right herself in his estimation she wasn't going to say another word.

"Well," she sighed dully, turning back to Burkholder, who always reminded her of a handsome yellow cat. "What are you here for?"

LICKING a cigarette, Burkholder fired it. "Inspection trip," he grinned, blowing twin jets of smoke from his nostrils. "You were making such a clatter with the dishes you didn't hear me put up my team and buckboard. Then I saw Cooper blow in, and thought I'd just rest in here till he left."

"Didn't Piute see you?"

Burkholder snorted. "That old wreck can't see his own feet. I don't wonder the Indians sneaked up on this place. Old Timberline's outlived his usefulness too. Get rid of them both. Now—" flipping the cigarette out the door, Burkholder caught her to him—"I'll just finish what Cooper started."

He moved so suddenly she couldn't evade him. His lips were hot against hers. Her left arm was pinned helplessly—but her right was free. Her hand caught the back of the black scarf about his neck. With a jerk that would have thrown a yearling bull she almost choked him.

He had to let her go. "You little weasel," he gasped, clawing at his throat. "I'll—"

Not waiting to hear his threat, she ran through the slackening rain toward the kitchen. "Lay an extra place for supper," she told the woman, knowing Burkholder would stay. Then she went on to her own room across the dining room.

"Now I am in a jackpot," she fumed, setting out dry clothes. And what had Burkholder said to Wade about a woman? The very mention of the woman made Wade look as sick as a poisoned pup.

When Barbara went to supper she wore a fringed buckskin suit. In it she felt, somehow, better able to cope with Burkholder.

The sky was still overcast and dusk had come early, so the lamp on the table was lighted. Piute and Timberline were already seated; Burkholder, leaning against the safe, had been watching her door. The minute she appeared he drew back her chair with a flourish that was more mockery than courtesy.

Tight-lipped, she merely nodded. The meal proceeded in silence. Piute and Timberline usually chattered like magpies. Tonight, however, seeming to feel the constraint in the air, they ate hurriedly and left.

Because she sensed what was coming and wanted to get it over with, Barbara ate quickly too. Finally, after an hour that seemed days long, the cook finished the dishes, and put out the kitchen lamp, and went off to her quarters.

Tipping back his chair, Burkholder hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his open calfskin vest. "Now listen, sister, the three-month trial Claiborne promised you is nearly up. Maybe you're not going to make it."

Across the table Barbara tensed herself. "He'll be the judge when the time comes."

Burkholder wagged his head. "Claiborne has been sent to St. Louis on business. I'm in charge, and anything I say goes. You

don't like me, but unless you relax a little —out you go. Understand? You've got a good thing here, and you'd be smart to hang onto it, especially now that I've spoiled your throw for Cooper. Anyway, that gal I spoke of is trackin' him down. She's visitin' some Army people at Fort Meade. That's how come I got wind of it all, through a sergeant who knew them both at Jefferson Barracks."

Feeling like a bowstring that would snap if another ounce of tension were added, Barbara sat staring at one of the horrible pink sleeve-garters Burkholder always wore. The silence was as heavy as wet hay.

After a full minute Burkholder stood up. "Think it over for an hour or so," he said with a leer that made her want to snatch the Arapahoe war-club from the mantel and fling it in his florid face. Then he swaggered out into the night.

Turning down the lamp, she went into her dark room, locked the door and stood for a moment looking out the open unscreened window into the blackness.

She had never felt so utterly alone. The silent cook, and Piute and Timberline, were long since asleep. Down by the corrals there was an intermittent glow of a cigarette. That would be Burkholder.

"Well, I wanted to stand on my own two feet, and here I am," she thought grimly, taking a crock filled with cut iris from her dresser and placing it in the center of the window sill. She flanked it with the water-pitcher and a heavy glass tumbler. If anyone tried to come over that sill, he'd make more clatter than a mule in a tin barn.

She undressed in the dark and got into bed, keeping close by her the brass-framed Griswold and Grier revolver that Titus Ballard had used against the Yankees.

The slow-ticking wooden clock in the dining-room struck ten, then eleven. The suspense, the awful silence, were almost suffocating. Nervous perspiration moistened the palms of Barbara's hands. She kept rubbing the right palm across the blanket so it wouldn't slip if she had to grab the worn butt of the old gun.

PRESENTLY she heard an indistinguishable sound. It could have been a smothered cough, or a boot slipping in the mud. Sitting up, she grasped the gun—thumb on the hammer, ready to draw it back. Five minutes of waiting were all she could stand. Rising quietly, she padded across the bearskin rug, put an ear against the partition. Someone was breathing heavily, and she felt her toes working nervously on the rug. There was a chink in the partition where the dried mud had fallen from between two logs. She had plugged it with a bit of cloth. Now she plucked out the cloth and put an eye to the slit.

Air sucked in through her teeth—for in the dining room she saw a man. Then the breath eased out again. The man was Piute. With his cocked ten-bore across his bony knees, he was sitting where he could watch all the doors. He'd probably never been more alert when helping night-guard General Cooper's brigade in Southern swamps.

Grateful to him, Barbara stepped to the window. When, for an instant, lightning brightened the horizon, she saw the crown of a hat so close that she could have reached out and touched the back of the man who wore it. It was a battered hat, and there was no mistaking its jagged outlines. That hat belonged to Timberline Jones.

Barbara slept then, till the cook started the breakfast clatter in the kitchen.

No one said a word about Burkholder. He was gone, just as a coyote sneaks off when the sheepman's dogs are watchful.

Days passed and nothing much happened. Coaches brought the usual loads of miners, cowmen and gamblers, who wolfed their food and left again. But there was no sign of Wade Cooper.

Barbara was dishing up fresh peas one day when she glanced out the kitchen

window. The dust-covered southbound was just creaking to a halt.

When particularly nice-looking ladies appeared, Barbara always took them into her room. And Barbara knew, when she saw the lady stepping from the coach, that her room would have another guest.

She was a tall woman all in gray. Her nod of thanks to the two bearded miners who handed her out was cold, imperious. She moved, taut and erect, like someone about to enter Buckingham Palace.

"This way, please," Barbara invited, meeting her at the door and leading the way into her own room. "Just make yourself at home. Dinner will be on in a minute."

Without really looking at the woman she started out again, but the woman said, "Don't go." It was a command, not a request.

Danger clouds flared in Barbara's cheeks.

"Close the door," the woman ordered. She had lifted the veil up over her small hat. With a start Barbara saw that she was young and pretty. She had lilac eyes shadowed with dark lashes; and hair the color of a ripe peach, yellow with rosy over-tones. Even powdered with Niobrara County dust it was evident that her skin was creamy-white and close-textured.

"I'm having my luggage put off here," the lady announced. "When I've eaten and rested a bit, I shall want a conveyance to take me to the ranch of Mr. Wade Cooper."

"Oh!" was all Barbara could manage.

"You may go now," the girl said, looking in the mirror and seeing that Barbara was still there.

Stiffening, Barbara was about to let fly a salty retort. Then she thought better of it.

"I'm afraid," she said levelly, "that you have the wrong impression of these parts. Mr. Wade Cooper lives, I understand, in a one-room log house with his ranch hands. He has no accommodations for guests. Anyway, there's no way for you and your traps to get twenty miles across country unless you ride one of our broncs, and pack the stuff on another."

With disbelief in her eyes, the girl turned. "Mr. Burkholder, a stage-line official at Deadwood, assured me that Mr. Cooper's place is easily reached from here and that you have ample facilities for transporting me and my things. Now please see to it, and don't argue any more."

"Burkholder didn't tell you the truth," Barbara flared. "He's just raised hell and put a chunk under it. The best I can do is to get word to Cooper's ranch that you're here. He'll send a wagon, if he has one." Slamming out, then, she collided with a pile of expensive-looking baggage which the stage driver had dumped on the floor.

Stooping, Barbara peered at the end of the small round-topped trunk. On the end of the trunk had been painted a name, but the word *Felicity* was all she could make out.

When the stage was ready to resume its journey, and the passengers had filed out, the express messenger took Barbara aside. "Here," he said, drawing a sealed package from each sagging side-pocket of his greasy buckskin coat. "Gold dust. Five thousand dollars' worth. Sign this receipt."

"What's the idea?" Barbara protested.

The messenger shrugged. "Burkholder's orders. He was tipped off we'd be jumped come dark, around Rawhide Creek, and aims to play safe."

"And if the bandits don't find it with you," Barbara grumbled, "what's to prevent them from high-tailing it up here and ransacking the place?"

"You, I guess." He grinned. "*Adios.*"

Burkholder had dealt her a swell hand, and Barbara knew it was likely on purpose.

Piute, with Felicity's hastily penned note to Wade Cooper, was already on his way, so his old ten-bore couldn't be counted on if Hat Creek were jumped tonight. Well, she and old Timberline could unravel a hot mess of cartridges if they had to.

BECAUSE Felicity had assumed that the room she'd been put into was hers till she left, Barbara moved her own few necessities for the night into Titus' old quarters.

After supper during which no one said anything, the two girls sat silent in the dining room. Barbara was hemming red-and-white checked napkins. Felicity was idly turning the pages of a novel.

Barbara had her revolver in the sewing basket beside her feet, and she knew that Timberline and his Sharps were outside where they'd do the most good.

Finally, when the clock whirred like an angry rattle and began to strike ten, Felicity closed the book, yawned prettily and rose. Just then a shot ripped through the racket the clock was making.

Through the tail of her eye Barbara had seen the red muzzle-blast out the front window. In an instant she'd doused the light and was at an open window at the rear with the cocked gun in her hand. "Visitors," she said calmly to Felicity. "Lock yourself in your room and lie on the floor."

She'd had to raise her voice to make the last few words heard, for from across the road someone was firing. An orange eye winked by the blacksmithshop, and a bullet struck the window frame with a thud.

Kneeling, her gun-hand on the sill, Barbara was ready for the next bright eye that winked. When it did she fired and heard a yelp. She heard the old Sharps roaring at someone else; then a figure loomed, running for the door. Her gun bit at it and it went down. Then the firing seemed to come from all directions. With a crash of glass a window-pane went; then a horn flew off the antelope head above the mantel.

"This," Barbara muttered, reaching into her apron pocket for more cartridges, "is no ordinary bunch of road agents. Burkholder sent this gang to wipe us out."

Like a striking snake an arm from behind went around her throat, and a hairy paw tried to wrench the gun from her hand. With the fury of a bobcat she fought, trying to get her teeth into the hand.

Abruptly the arm relaxed. Summoning her last ounce of strength, she struck up and back with the gun, felt it slam into flesh. Gasping for breath, she got shakily to her knees and looked out.

Guns were rattling now like popcorn on

(Continued on page 112)

THIS INNOCENT HEART

Rusty Markham was fresh from a broken romance and determined to be Miss Efficiency Plus no longer. To lush and tropical Haiti she came—with her mind made up. From then on, with the mystery of the jungle background behind her, she'd be the helpless type, the clinging vine, the feather-brained glamor girl. And when she'd remodeled her personality, she found that it fit—two men. Francis Flick's tale of a girl's romantic dilemma will appear in February ALL-STORY LOVE, heading a contents page of your favorite ALL-STORY writers.

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CHAPTER ONE

An Outlaw's Welcome

JUDE PEARSON, huddled alone over her dying camp fire, rose to fetch more wood. She moved outside the circle of the flickering flame into the chilling night of the open prairie country. A few steps and she stopped, alert eyes having seen the deeper shadow under a nearby mesquite tree. She slid out her six-shooter.

"Who's there? Speak quick or I'll shoot!"

The shadow moved, resolved into the form of a man. "No need shooting," a calm voice said. "I don't mean any harm, ma'am. I was just cold, and your fire looked good."

Jude's voice was hard and dangerously quiet. "Did mine look better because you

Jude laughed shortly. "Catching up on your kissing, Mister Harmon?"

Exciting Pioneer Love Novelette

By

Ennen Reaves Hall

Stampede to Paradise

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On the eve of the Cherokee land rush, pretty Jude adopted a fugitive outlaw—because only he could lead her to the skunk who'd left her at the altar.

thought I was alone? There's plenty of camp fires going tonight, mister." Her glance flicked at the hundreds of camp fires spread out along the Kansas-Indian Territory border as far as the eye could see.

His answer surprised her. "That's partly it, ma'am. I got a business proposition to talk over with you."

"Not with me. I've got no business talk to make with saddle tramps or carpet baggers. Get going, mister." The light from the fire glittered on the gun barrel in her hand.

The man moved toward her.

She retreated only a step, then warned him again: "One more step and I'll shoot!"

He stopped. "Afraid? You don't look like a woman easy scared. See, I'm not even armed. You can keep your gun on me while we talk."

The challenge was too much for Jude. "I've never seen the man yet I was afraid of. Nor one I wanted to talk to any longer than I had to. Talk fast, mister."

There was no mistaking the harsh sincerity of her voice. People who knew Jude Pearson called her hard. She even thought of herself that way, finding it the best defense. Life could be tough to a woman alone and unprotected in 1893.

She said coldly, "I might as well warn you before you start that I'm not listening."

"You'll listen," he said confidently. He walked over to the fire, brushing carelessly past the very tip of her gun-barrel. "You're a smart girl, Jude Pearson; you'll listen."

"You know me?" Jude was curious now. "I've never seen you before."

"I know you. I've seen you at the Cattlemen's Cafe in Dodge City many a time. But you never saw me. You never saw any man—except Bryan Hodges."

Jude froze at that name. Every drop of blood in her veins seemed to turn to ice water, and a lump of hard ice in her throat made it difficult to breathe.

"You hate him, don't you?" The man leaned forward, and the firelight showed the strong lines of a face too young for the bitterness that was etched sharply around eyes and mouth. He had good eyes, she noticed. And a strong mouth.

"You hate him," the man repeated, "and with good reason. I hate him, too. How would you like to meet up with Bryan Hodges, Jude Pearson?"

Jude's levi-clad figure stood straight and still as the young blackjack trees silhouetted behind her. "I'd like it," she said. "Go on, mister. What do you know about Bryan Hodges?"

"I know that he's already in the Strip, squatting on a choice piece of land. Land he hasn't got any right to. I can take you to him, Jude Pearson."

Across the fire their eyes met and clashed. His were as hard and unyielding as hers, filled with the same driving hate that filled her heart. But Jude didn't trust him. There was no reason why she should. No reason why she should trust any man. Not after Bryan Hodges.

"Why?" she asked harshly. "What do you want from me?"

"I want to get across the border. I haven't got any papers—but you have."

Silence followed his admission. A silence broken at last by Jude:

"You have till noon tomorrow to get your papers. Unless there's a reason."

"There's a reason." He spoke bruskly. "If there hadn't been I wouldn't have bothered coming to you. You're smart enough to know that."

JUDE had known it, of course. This man was hiding from the law and didn't dare approach the government registration booths. This same reason would keep many a man from this new land of Canaan, though their ilk had not been barred from the earlier run of '89. Jude made a quick decision.

"I'm not saddling myself with an outlaw. Not even to meet up with Bryan Hodges. So get going, mister."

He moved nearer and she saw that he was a tall man, lean and lithe. Everything about him spoke of the open range. He took cigarette papers and tobacco from a shirt pocket and rolled a smoke with deft movements of one hand. Then he spoke again, softly.

"Better think it over. You're a lone woman traveling into a strange, wild country. The cattlemen and the Injuns aren't going to welcome homesteaders, no matter how many papers they have. I know the country. I was in with three boomer trains. I might be a big help."

"I won't need any help," Jude said. "I can shoot straight as any man. I can take care of myself."

"Think so?" He laughed softly and the sound was strangely irritating to Jude. "A woman as beautiful as you, Jude Pearson, is a fool to think she can take care of herself. No matter how straight she can shoot."

Jude's cheeks flamed in the darkness as she remembered Bryan Hodges. She hadn't taken very good care of herself that time, letting him make a fool of her. But she had learned about men from Bryan Hodges. And she was furious at being reminded of that bitter lesson.

"What has looks to do with it?" she asked angrily. "I'm not afraid."

He moved closer. His hand reached out and closed on her arm, fingers biting deep into her soft flesh. And suddenly she was afraid. For that hand was drawing her closer and she seemed powerless to stop him. His eyes were stabbing into hers like pin points of flame, and his voice, though hardly more than a whisper of sound, was tense and rough.

"Not afraid? You need to be, Jude Pearson. There are men in the Cherokee country who haven't seen anything so beautiful as you in ages. They'd fight like wolves for a smile from you. And for a kiss—"

Then he jerked her roughly into the hard circle of his arms and his lips took hers ruthlessly. She fought with all the young strength of her body, but his arms were like iron bands about her.

Suddenly all the ice about her heart seemed to break up and she found herself responding to his lips. The sweetest ecstasy tingled through her and she didn't want him to stop.

The thought was staggering, revolting. Thoroughly frightened now at the betrayal of her own heart, Jude raised her booted foot and kicked him sharply on the shin. His arms relaxed enough for her to raise the gun in her hand. He saw her lift it, and his hand shot out to grab hers. For a moment they struggled. Then suddenly the gun went off with a loud report, and she felt him crumple and fall against her.

Horrified, she stared down at the still form at her feet. A thin trickle of blood ran from his temple down his cheek. He lay terribly still.

Dropping to her knees, she lifted his head into her lap and dabbed at the blood. She saw with tremendous relief that the wound was only skin deep.

His eyes opened and he whispered, "Don't mind, Jude. I had it coming to me. I hadn't any right—but I've dreamed of doing that ever since the first time I saw you . . ."

There came the sound of running feet, the excited voices of men and women. Before Jude could move, they were surrounded by a ring of questioning faces. Questions were flung at her:

"What happened?"

"Who shot?"

"Is anybody hurt?"

Jude sat speechless, staring at her neighboring campers. What could she say? The truth would go hard with this stranger. For some reason she couldn't define, she was reluctant to turn him back to the law.

"It—it was an accident," she stammered.

A horse came thundering up and the rider, a member of the military border patrol, slipped to the ground. "What's the trouble here? We heard a shot." The officer broke

off at the sight of the wounded man in Jude's lap.

The stranger struggled up to a sitting position, holding his head weakly. He answered the lawman before Jude could think of what to say.

"No trouble, Captain. It seems my sister and I were scuffling over the gun, and it went off."

"Damn fool thing to do," the officer said. "What's your name and where're you from? Are you registered?"

"Pearson, from Dodge City," the stranger answered. "And sure we're registered. Jude, show him your certificate. My sister owned the Cattlemen's Cafe in Dodge City. Ever been there, Captain?"

It was a magnificent bluff and it worked. The officer hardly glanced at the paper Jude held out. He was looking at Jude with interest.

"Certainly I've been there. So you're Miss Jude Pearson, eh? Going to quit business and try homesteading? Well, I wish you luck. Your brother was lucky tonight, all right. A fraction closer and he wouldn't have made any race tomorrow."

Jude shuddered. A fraction closer and neither of them would have been in the race. People in trouble with the law weren't allowed to enter this home-seeker's paradise. She dared not speak now if she had wanted to.

The young man laid his head back in her lap and closed his eyes tiredly. After the others were all gone Jude looked down at his white face and resented the rush of pity that stirred her. She pushed him, almost roughly, to the ground.

"You were lucky, all right. Next time you try anything like that my bullet will dig deeper."

He didn't answer. He only rolled closer to the fire and fell asleep. There was nothing to do but let him stay tonight. But before she turned into her own bed, Jude got a heavy blanket from her wagon and threw it over him.

CHAPTER TWO

A Borrowed Sister

WHEN Jude awoke the next morning her self-invited guest sat before a brightly burning fire. She saw at once that there was wood enough for cooking breakfast, and that her horses had been watered and fed.

He looked at her gravely, with just the hint of a smile touching his mouth and eyes. "Good morning, sister."

"What are you waiting here for?"

"For breakfast, my dear sister. And then for the sound of the gun that will start us on our way south."

"You're not going with me!"

He laughed softly. "I think I am. You can hardly afford to leave your wounded brother behind."

Jude knew a threat when she heard it. Any delay for questioning, even, could be disastrous. And this man had nothing to lose. With tight lips she set about preparing breakfast for two.

A wagon had moved in close beside hers during the night. A man strolled over now and introduced himself. He was so small he was hardly more than a caricature of a man, and as he talked his too-prominent Adam's apple jerked grotesquely up and down.

"I'm Jonathan Peck, from up Nebrasky. Which way you folks heading? Know anything about the Cherokee country, stranger?"

Amazed at the ease with which he lied, Jude heard her pseudo brother give his name as Lon Pearson. He added, "We're starting off on the Chisholm Trail, straight south for a ways. A wagon can make better time on the trail. After I cross Salt Creek I'm turning west until I pass the ninety-eighth meridian. Then you can get dollar-fifty-cent land, and the best you ever saw."

Jonathan Peck squatted by the fire and

began asking eager questions. Listening as she worked, Jude was just stooping to set the coffee pot on the fire when there was a clang and the pot seemed to explode in her hands, falling right into the blaze.

"Whoopee!" a boyish voice yelled behind her. "Hit it square in the middle!"

Jude whirled and saw the impish, freckled face of a boy of nine or ten. He held a slingshot in his hand and was grinning proudly.

Coffee was precious and so were pots. And Jude's nerves were already on edge. In one quick stride she reached the boy, flipped him over her knee and gave him a sharp slap.

"Another hit square in the middle," she snapped.

The boy howled loudly. A woman came running. The largest woman Jude had ever seen. With a hand like a young ham she spun Jude about.

"Who do you think you are, spanking my Bud?"

"He didn't get half what he deserves," Jude retorted. "He deliberately spilled my coffee."

"You're a fine one to be talking, Miss High-and-Mighty. Shootin' your own brother last night—if he is your brother. Wouldn't surprise me a bit—"

Jonathan Peck had risen hastily. "Now, Ma, don't say too much."

"I'll say what I please, Jonathan Peck. And don't you go telling me what I am or ain't to do. You get yourself over to that wagon and start packing."

Meekly the little man obeyed.

Bud put his fingers in his ears and stuck out his tongue at Jude before scampering after them.

Jude, seeing red, made a move to catch the boy but was stopped by the quiet voice of the man by the fire.

"No use letting folks rile you so, sister. They don't mean any real harm."

"Quit calling me 'sister,'" Jude flared. "The next time you do it I'm going to hit you with something." Even as she spoke she realized how much like Ma Peck she sounded.

"All right, if you don't like it," he said, unperturbed. "How about Pepper, then? That seems to suit you. Regular little firecracker." His eyes lingered on her bright, copper-colored hair, while his fingers touched that angry mark on his face.

Jude slammed smoking hot griddle cakes before him. "Listen, you. I'm letting you ride across the border with me and that's all. You leave when we get in a few miles. See?"

"Before we find Bryan Hodges? You disappoint me, Pepper. I didn't think a girl with your spirit would forget how a man had jilted her right at the altar and run off with the money she'd been foolish enough to turn over to him."

"Shut up!" Eyes blazing as brightly as her hair, Jude snatched up a stick and hurled it straight at her tormentor. If he hadn't ducked it would have caught him squarely on the head. Before she could pick up another, he had reached her side and had her arms pinned tightly. At his touch sanity returned to Jude and all the fight left her. But the hot blaze was still in her eyes as they met his searching ones.

"You throw that up to me again and I'll kill you," she promised huskily.

"So it still stings," he said quietly. "A year ain't long enough to forget a dirty deal like that, is it, Pepper? Nor a hundred years. That's why you and I are finding Bryan Hodges. We both got a score to settle. And he's got land and cattle we're going to have."

JUDE'S hands clenched as all her old hurt and hatred swept over her. "How'd you know—about us?" She'd been wondering about that all night, but his answer came as a shock.

"Hodges told me. Bragged about how he was going into the Territory and buy cattle with your money. That same night

he got me and my partner in a crooked blackjack game and cleaned us. Jonesy squawked and Hodges shot him. When I went after him he stunned me with a clip on the head. Then he crammed the smoking gun in my hand and the marked cards and part of Jonesy's roll in my pockets—and beat it. The law stuck me in jail. But they couldn't hold me forever—not with Bryan Hodges running loose."

Jude couldn't doubt the story she had just heard. There was too much sincere bitterness in the man's voice. "But how do you know where he is? What makes you think—"

"We went in together with a boomer train. The cattlemen ran us out, but not till after I'd built me a cabin on the land I'd picked. Hodges made some sort of deal to run rustled stock for a big cattleman. He bragged that he could go back. I got word he was living in my house. But I aim to see he don't stay long."

Silence fell between them. Then he broke it softly. "Are you with me, Pepper? I can't get there alone and on foot. And it's as fine a homestead as you'd want."

Jude drew a long breath. "I'm with you. But remember I can shoot. And the next time I won't miss, either."

"You won't need to waste any more bullets on me," he promised. "I'll ask nothing more than a chance to meet Bryan Hodges."

Near mid morning the soldiers rode by to check their registration papers again. "Seen any suspicious strangers about?" they questioned. "We've had word to watch for a man named Lon Harmon, who broke jail in Dodge the other night. He was being held for murder."

Jude shook her bright head, smiled dazzlingly, and took her paper from the militiaman's hands before he'd hardly glanced at it.

"My brother and I must be lining up," she murmured. "And I do hope we don't see your murderer."

An hour before noon they were in place, the very noses of the team on the starting line. Lon Harmon sat boldly on the high seat beside Jude, the lines in his hand. He had taken every precaution for the race ahead of them—shifting the load inside to balance it perfectly and lashing it securely, taking off the thick canvas cover of the wagon to cut wind resistance, and carefully checking every inch of the harness and wagon gear. Watching him make ready, Jude's excitement had grown until she could hardly force herself to sit calmly while they awaited the signal.

"What's it like, this place you located, Lon? Tell me about it."

A shadow crossed his face and filled his eyes. "Like a Garden of Eden, Pepper. Water, trees—everything."

"Even a snake," Jude said. "But how do you plan to keep it this time, if you get it, Lon? You haven't any papers to show."

His laugh was brusk and hard. "I don't expect to keep it, Pepper. I'm giving you the garden. I'm taking the snake."

In spite of her own bitter hatred for Bryan Hodges, the venom in Lon Harmon's voice made Jude shudder.

They fell silent, then, eyes glued to the distant hill where the soldiers were gathering. They mustn't miss, by a fraction of a moment, the signal to start.

* * *

When the signal came, at exactly twelve o'clock, it was nothing more than a puff of smoke from guns whose sound of firing was lost in the wild shout that broke from thousands of throats.

The sudden plunge of her own team almost threw Jude from the seat. "We're off!" Lon shouted, rising to snap the long whip over the horses' heads. "Hold tight, Pepper, we're off!"

And off they were, bouncing and jolting over prairies that had suddenly come alive with a mass of frenzied, swift-moving humanity. Expertly Lon guided the team

over the rough terrain, weaving in and out of the paths of thundering hoofs until they came to the worn ruts and smoother travel of the Chisholm Freighter Trail. Then he let the horses settle down into an easy lope that ate up the miles. Almost before Jude knew it they were well ahead of the other vehicles.

By mid afternoon they had reached the small river called Salt Fork, crossed it and turned west. Then they were traveling through the rich Cimarron Valley and Jude was stirred by the richness and beauty of this new country. Here and there cattle dotted the range. Lon Harmon pointed toward them.

"That means trouble. I didn't figure those cattlemen would give up easy."

Uneasiness moved like a live thing in Jude. "The ranchers were supposed to move their herds, weren't they?"

"Supposed to, but some wouldn't. They have had too good a thing here for years. Once a man gets to thinking of something as his, it's mighty hard to get him to turn loose of it peacably."

An hour later he spoke again. "We're getting close. Just a few more miles."

At that moment the air was split by a strange sound. A weird cry, half scream, half whoop. It was repeated and grew in volume until it seemed to fill all the air about them. Then there were shots, followed by a woman's piercing screams.

Lon jerked the reins taut and stood up, listening. Again those terrifying sounds.

"What is it?" Jude whispered.

"Sounds like Injuns, but I can't believe it. There's no wild Injuns in this country."

Again the terrified screams of a woman, and Lon held the whip poised as he looked at Jude.

"I don't believe it's Injuns, but it's damn sure trouble. Pepper, you heard that woman scream. This is your team. Shall I turn back or go on?"

Jude didn't hesitate. "Go on, Lon. Somebody needs help."

"That's the way I had you figured," he said simply.

The words warmed Jude's heart.

CHAPTER THREE

Roundup of Secrets

WITHIN a half mile they caught sight of a swiftly moving figure. It was a woman, running and stumbling across the prairie, her long skirts fluttering out behind her. Another moment and they were beside her.

She stumbled again and fell, then lay on the ground exhausted, crying hysterically. Lon leaped down and lifted her to a sitting position and Jude gasped as she saw her face.

She was young and lovely, the most beautiful girl Jude had ever seen. Her long black hair had fallen down and now lay like rich velvet across Lon's shoulder. Her eyes, too, were velvety soft and dark, and the tears that streamed from them in no way clouded their luster.

Lon questioned her gently, quickly.

"Indians," she moaned. "They came riding up, yelling terribly. Father shot at them and they—shot him."

Jude couldn't keep from asking, "And you left him alone?" Lon gave her a reproving look.

"Mother's there," the girl sobbed. "I was so scared!"

"You're all right now," Lon comforted her. "We'll see about your father." He helped the girl up into the wagon seat.

"Poor little thing," he said. "Take care of her, Jude."

But Jude sat stiffly, unable to say a word of comfort. She kept thinking of the scene ahead, and of a girl running away without helping her wounded father.

The family were homesteaders from Texas, the girl told them. Her father was Lem Hardy, and she was Luella Hardy.

They found Lem Hardy stretched out

beside a dead horse, groaning with pain. His white-faced wife was attending him as best she could. At first glance Jude saw she was too young to be Luella's mother.

The woman's eyes were hard as she looked at her step-daughter. "So you came back?" There was scorn in her voice.

"I—I brought help," Luella said defensively. "We had to have help, didn't we?"

The enmity between these two was a live force.

Lon looked up gravely from his examination of the injured man. "I think it's only a flesh wound, but it's plowed deep. We'll have to make camp, heat water and find that bullet." He looked questioningly at Jude.

She nodded gravely. She knew what that decision was costing Lon Harmon.

A line of slender trees broke the skyline a half-mile or less off the trail. That meant a stream, and protection of a sort. "We'll go over there," Lon said.

They loaded the wounded man, and Lon substituted one of two saddle horses tied behind the Hardy wagon for the animal killed. Then he drove, with Luella close beside him. Jude, her own reins in her hands again, felt as though she had just stepped out into a dark and unpeopled world.

Luella protested when Lon gathered brushwood for a fire. "Those Indians will see the smoke and come back."

"The gal's right," Lem Hardy said. "Best not show a smoke."

Hardy's wife said sharply, "Best let you die, I guess."

Jude knew her real anger was for Luella.

The water was soon heated. Lon carefully boiled the sharpest, thinnest knife they had. Then he looked gravely down at the sweat-beaded face of the suffering man.

"This is going to hurt, old-timer. I won't be much good at it but I'll do the best I can."

Hardy set his lips. "Start digging."

IT WAS bad. In spite of an almost superhuman effort to lie still, the pain-crazed man writhed and twitched as Lon awkwardly probed for the lead.

"Hold him still," Lon implored, sweat pouring off his own face.

Alma Hardy pitted her strength against her husband's, but she wasn't enough. "Help me, Lu!" she called.

But Luella stood with face buried in her hands. "I can't" she cried. "I can't stand seeing you hurt him so."

So it was Jude who helped to hold him still until Lon had finished.

She rose and went down to the little stream to wait there until the shaking in her limbs stopped. When she turned back she almost ran into Lon and Luella. They stood just out of sight of the camp, and Lon's arms were about the girl, her dark head rested in the hollow of his shoulder. As Jude watched, anger rising unreasonably in her, Lon bent his head and kissed the girl in his arms.

Jude laughed shortly. "Catching up on your kissing, Mister Harmon?"

They looked up and quickly sprang apart. Luella, eyes bright as beads, turned and ran toward camp.

Lon ignored her jibes. "She's frightened."

"And so pretty, and so helpless," Jude jeered. "I notice it's the pretty, helpless kind you men go for."

"Why, Pepper!" A smile tugged at his lips. "You sound almost jealous. You wouldn't be wanting me to kiss you, would you? Remember your promise to shoot me if I tried."

He stopped, eyes on her empty holster. Suddenly Jude knew she wanted that kiss more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. Something beyond her control put words on her lips:

"I—left my gun in camp."

Slowly he drew her into his arms. "A

man would be a fool that wouldn't go for you, Pepper." His lips pressed down on hers, taking her yielding mouth in a long kiss. She made no move to end that kiss. She wanted it to last forever.

But it did end, abruptly. A wagon lumbered up to the campsite. They ran swiftly to join the others.

A little man came out of the covered wagon. His mouth flew open and his Adam's apple bobbed as he spied Lon.

"The Pearsons!" he yelped. "Ma, come on out. It's the Pearsons. . . . We just had to run from Injuns!"

The fat face of Ma Peck appeared in the opening. She glared at Lon. "You and your talk! If'n it hadn't been for you we'd have stopped a long ways back, stead of coming right into Injun country."

"You haven't come to Injun country, Mrs. Peck," Lon told her. "This is cattle country. It's a safe bet the ranchers are back of all this."

"Ranchers, my foot!" the big woman snorted. "You'll be telling me next those painted hyenas that chased us wasn't Injuns. . . . Joanathan Peck, you turn this team right around and take me back to civilized folks."

Lon suggested they join camps for the night, in case of any possible attack. Grumbling, Mrs. Peck finally consented.

Jude walked away from the group. Then the voices of Alma and Luella Hardy reached her. They were quarreling, quietly but bitterly.

"You won't try to understand, Lu," Mrs. Hardy said.

"That's the trouble," the dark-eyed Luella cried. "I do understand all too well. I know you just married father for your own protection and persuaded him to bring us into this wild country where you think you'll be safe from the law!"

"Luella!" the stricken voice of Lem Hardy cried out. "Don't dare say such things! Don't think them!"

"You can't stop me from thinking!" Luella broke in fiercely. "Or from hating! I hate her and I hate this country!"

Jude went quietly on her way.

CHAPTER FOUR

"He Kissed Me Too!"

"CATTLEMEN or Indians," Jonathan Peck said, "we've got to have help. I'll leave my folks here and ride back to the first military camp. It's only about forty miles."

"No!" Lem Hardy said quickly, and so emphatically the others all looked at him in surprise. "We can't have the soldiers—I mean, they likely wouldn't ride away out here, just on our say-so."

"They might not," Lon agreed, after a moment. "Such a story will sound crazy. They're sure that the ranchers moved out when they were told to. And that Injun stuff would never be believed."

Alma Hardy spoke suddenly. "Tell them, Mr. Peck, that Alma Martin, wanted for murder in Denison, is here. They'll come for me."

"No, no, Alma!" Lem Hardy tried to get up from his pallet bed but her hand gently restrained him. "Don't say any more. You mustn't."

"I must, Lem. Can't you see I have to go back and face it? There'll be no peace for you or me until I do."

In the shocked silence that followed her words, Jude heard her low voice add, for her husband's ears only: "Peace, Lem—it'll be worth anything we have to pay for it."

Lon stood so suddenly Jude jumped. "If that don't fetch them, Peck, tell the soldiers there's two wanted folks here. Tell them Lon Harmon, wanted for murder and jail breaking in Dodge City, is here for the taking."

Luella's cry, just a thin trickle of sound, was lost in Mrs. Peck's violent, triumphant blast: "I knowed it! Git me out o'

here, Jonathan Peck, afore we git our throats cut."

"Now, Ma, hold your horses." Peck's voice was mildly placating as usual. "Don't nobody around here look very dangerous to me."

"You're not going without me!" Mrs. Peck was giving orders now. "You're not leaving me an' Bud with jail breakers an' murderers. An' likely enough these two ain't even brother an' sister. I knowed all along there was somethin' funny."

"Maybe it's us, Ma. Maybe it's funny, us thinking we're any better'n other folks in trouble." Peck spoke quickly, as though fearful of losing a new-found courage. "Didn't we run away from Nebrasky to git away from debts we couldn't pay and git a new start in life? I guess that's what we're all looking for, a new start. Reckon this country is a sort of beginning-again land. I'm riding for those soldiers, but I ain't telling them nothing about no fugitives."

Before Ma could do more than gasp in surprise, he moved toward his team and started unhitching.

When Alma Hardy stumbled away through the darkness a little later, Jude followed, wanting to comfort her but not knowing how. She found the other woman leaning against a tree, staring off into star-studded space. If Alma heard her she gave no sign.

Jude touched her arm gently. "It's Luella that's worrying you, isn't it?"

"Yes." Her voice was hardly more than a toneless whisper. "She hates me. She thinks I married her father just to get away. But I loved Lem. I've loved him for years."

Jude knew, instinctively, the woman wanted to talk—needed to talk. She waited.

"It was my brother-in-law," Alma's toneless voice went on. "He beat my sister when he was drunk. That day—when I found her like that—I followed and shot him. Then I went to Lem and told him. We were married at once and left. But now I have to go back."

"Some men aren't fit to live," was all Jude could think of to say. "I wouldn't worry so, Mrs. Hardy."

"Worry?" Her voice suddenly became a small, explosive sound in the night. "You've never been a fugitive to say that, Jude Pearson. You get to be afraid of every moving leaf, even the sound of your own breathing. You get to distrusting everybody. You're soon like a body slowly choking to death on poisoned air. You're never free. And a person has to feel free to live."

There was a step behind them and Lon's voice said, "Lem wants you, Mrs. Hardy. He's fretting."

Alma went quickly. Lon added to Jude, "I'm riding a ways with Peck, just in case those fellows are still on the trail. I don't figure this camp wil be discovered as long as we stay quiet in the trees. They likely think we've all turned back."

"Lon, why did you say you were wanted for murder? You told me you didn't kill Jones."

"I didn't, Pepper. But I'm going to kill Bryan Hodges. Today. His place—my place—is just up the creek a couple of miles. So by the time the soldiers get here, I'll be wanted for a murder I've done."

THE calm finality of his voice sent an icy chill along Jude's spine. She had wanted Bryan Hodges killed, had even wanted to kill him herself. Yet suddenly everything seemed different. Bryan didn't seem to matter any more. No one mattered but Lon Harmon.

She moved impulsively nearer and put a hand on his arm. His other hand closed over hers, and at his touch love flooded through her, like the rushing, tumbling waters of a high river. Everything else was swept away before that flood—all her hatred of Bryan Hodges, her desire for revenge.

He kissed her—a long, sweet kiss. *It*

isn't Luella, she thought triumphantly. *It's me, Jude Pearson, he loves.*

"Lon," she said breathlessly, when she could speak, "Lon, that little man, Peck, said something nice. About this being a beginning-again land. Can't we make it that, for us? Can't we forget Bryan Hodges and go on somewhere else and begin again —together?"

His arms stiffened and fell away from her and she could feel a coldness come between them. And humiliating doubt was like the cold steel of a knife in her heart. Lon had not yet said he loved her!

He didn't say it. Instead he said slowly, carefully, "There's some trails too narrow to turn around on, Jude. I've got to go on the way I've started. And I've got to go on alone."

All Jude's bright new world fell to pieces about her. Once more she had offered her love to a man—and he had rejected it!

Out of her hurt she said, a little wildly: "Maybe I made another mistake. Maybe I haven't the kind of beauty Luella has—"

"Luella's kind of beauty," he said quietly, "can be found most anywhere. What you have to give a man, Jude, are precious things—courage and strength. But they're not for me."

He turned then and walked swiftly away. Immediately Jude heard the two horses leaving camp. . . .

With the first break of dawn the women built a cautious fire and had a hurried breakfast. Mrs. Peck aroused Bud and sent him down to the creek to wash his sleep-filled eyes. He was back in a moment, eyes rolling in fright, crying hoarsely, "Ma! Ma! It bit me! A big snake bit me. Right there!"

In horror the woman looked at the tiny twin marks on the boy's leg.

Jude was the first to find tongue. "What kind of snake? Tell us. Quick!"

"A big snake with a shiny back," Bud blubbered. "Ma, am I gonna die?"

Ma Peck collapsed into a quivering mass of helplessness, eyes staring from her ashen face as though looking at death.

It was death, Jude realized, seeing how rapidly the boy's leg was changing color.

Alma Hardy saw it, too, and acted with lightning speed. Snatching up one of the sharp knives she gasped, "Hold him, Jude!"

Jude pitted her strength against that of the fighting boy as Alma made two quick cross incisions. Then Alma put her own soft mouth to the bleeding wound and began drawing out the poisoned blood. The child grew still and quiet.

Jude snatched up a vessel and ran for water. As she came back Alma was cauterizing the wound with a hot ember from the fire. She took the water from Jude and cleansed her mouth carefully, then said: "He'll be all right now. I learned what to do about rattler bites in Texas."

Lem Hardy said anxiously, "That was a risky think to do, Alma."

"It was a mighty fine thing," Ma Peck said, her harsh voice turned gentle. "And I reckon I'd stop worrying about that fellow you killed, Mrs. Hardy. Seems to me the Lord ought to be willing to swap him for my Bud, whoever he was."

Jude breathed a sigh of relief. Mrs. Peck would not talk to the soldiers now. Unless Luella did, Alma Hardy was safe. But Luella, Jude knew, was no more to be trusted than the beautiful diamondback that had bit Bud. She strapped on her gun holster, then took Bud to one side.

"If your father brings back the soldiers, Bud, don't you think you could see that Luella didn't get a chance to talk to any of them alone?"

Bud got the idea and his eyes shone. "Could I! You just leave it to me, Jude. Me an' my slingshot. I'll take care of her."

Luella followed Jude to the edge of the trees. "Where are you going?"

"For a walk," Jude told the dark-eyed girl. "And when Lon gets back, keep him here, Luella. You'll know how."

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Luella's eyes glowed like sullen fires. "You bet I do! He doesn't love you. He kissed me last night."

Jude laughed softly. "He kissed me too, Luella. But I guess kisses can say a lot of things. I know what mine said."

And that knowledge was a soft singing in her blood, making her tired feet move quickly and lightly as she set off on her long walk. Two miles up the creek, Lon had said. Only two miles, but how far would it take her from Lon? No matter, because now she knew that that kiss last night had said *I love you* plainer than spoken words could ever do.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jude's Vengeance

SHE knew when she reached the place, from Lon's description. The one-room cabin was set back a little ways from the creek, sheltered by the friendly sweep of giant pecan trees, their protecting limbs meeting above the mud-plastered roof. It was a scene of quiet peace, and pain knifed through Jude as she thought what life could mean here. But not without Lon.

Moving softly, she stood in the doorway unobserved. Bryan Hodges ate alone at a table, his back to the door. She knew he was Bryan, even after a year. She had not forgotten that glistening black hair, those broad, powerful shoulders.

Once the swagger of those shoulders had set her heart racing wildly, but her heart had deceived her then. It had told her lies about love. Now she knew love wasn't concerned with a man's size or the way his hair curled. Love looked deeper and saw his character reflected in little things. In just the way he kissed, perhaps. . . .

Her hand was steady on her six-shooter and her voice rang clearly as she said: "Reach high, Bryan!"

(Continued on page 104)

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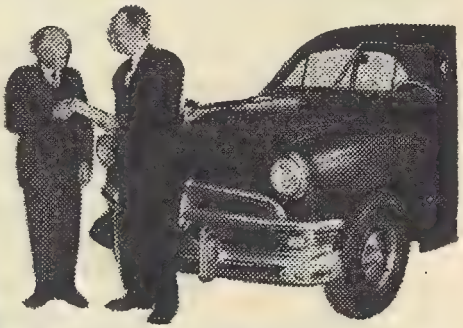

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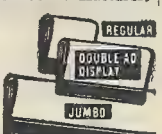

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RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

(Continued from page 102)

The man at the table whirled, his plate clattering to the floor. Seeing the look in her eyes, he slowly raised his hands above his head as he got to his feet.

"Well, Jude, this is a surprise!"

She cut him off short. "Stop pretending, Bryan. You're not glad to see me. And you know what I'm here for. To collect."

His small eyes shifted uneasily and she knew he was measuring his chances at attack. Knew, too, how willingly he would kill her to save himself.

"Don't try it, Bryan. I don't think you've forgotten how straight I can shoot. And you ought to know how much I'd like it."

"Now, Jude, no use feeling that way. I was crazy about you. Who wouldn't be? But I had to leave Dodge City in a hurry."

"I know about that hurry."

"Now, Jude, listen." He lowered his hands and took a step nearer her.

"Not another step, Bryan. I came here to kill you. You know that, don't you? And you know Jude Pearson never ran a bluff in her life. There's just one way you can save your miserable hide. Write in this," she took a notebook from her jeans pocket and tossed it to him, "a receipted bill of sale for every head of stock you've got. And throw in a confession that you killed a man named Jones, in Dodge City—that Lon Harmon is innocent."

He winced as she threw those names at him, and a muscle in his face jerked spasmodically. "Do you think I'm crazy, Jude? I won't do it."

"Then die, if you prefer," Jude said coolly. "By the time I count ten—"

She began counting slowly, deliberately.

His eyes grew frantic; sweat glistened on his face. At the count of eight he pleaded. "Listen, Jude, we can straighten this out—"

"Nine," Jude said inexorably.

He broke then. "All right, you win."

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

Lips between his teeth, eyes angry, he wrote as she dictated. She moved nearer and with her free hand reached for the book he extended toward her.

He did exactly as she expected. As her hand closed over it, he grabbed her wrist and swung her toward him. It was a quick move but Jude was quicker. Her shot was a split-second sooner—but his jerk had thrown her off balance and the shot went wild. It merely plowed through his sleeve and ripped a neat ridge along his forearm. She jumped back, gun leveled again.

"You little hellcat!" he gritted. "You shot me!"

She saw his holster hanging from a chair back and took his gun and slipped it into her own empty holster. "Now you're going to fork your horse and leave the country," she told him.

Just then a sound reached her ears and she looked out to see Lon Harmon dismounting in the yard. She had no time for planning!

"Quick, stand here in front of me, Bryan! You haven't a chance if you don't. Lon Harmon has come to kill you."

HE JUMPED to the position she indicated, beside her but slightly in front so that her gun, unseen by Lon, pressed into Bryan's ribs with her left hand. In the right hand she held Bryan's gun in plain view.

"Fork your horse again, Lon," she called sharply, "and ride off."

Lon stood staring. "Jude! What are you doing here?"

"Stopping you from killing anybody. You can't shoot Bryan without hitting me, Lon. And you know I can and will shoot." She hoped fervently he would believe that.

"So you're on his side. You love this skunk after all. Luella said you'd gone to meet your sweetheart, but I couldn't believe her."

Hodges stiffened a little, just a flexing of muscles. But Jude felt it and knew his mind. There was desperation in her voice as she pleaded. "Please, Lon, don't make me shoot. But I will if you don't leave at once." Only it would be Bryan she would have to shoot, she knew. Better that she kill him than Lon.

Lon seemed to reach a sudden decision. "All right, I'll go if that's the way you feel about it."

He remounted, picked up the reins and dug his spurs in deep. The horse reared, then hit the ground running. But he wasn't running away from the house. Instead, he came straight toward them!

Bryan yelled and jumped, but he was too late. As the horse swerved at the door, Lon left the saddle in a flying leap that carried him straight into Hodges' bulky form. The two men crashed to the ground in a tangled heap of flaying legs and arms.

They fought furiously. Over and over they rolled across the yard. Jude circled around and around them, terrified but helpless. Bryan rolled free of Lon and grabbed for his gun.

Jude drew a bead then, knowing she had to kill Bryan and end this bloody battle. But before she could pull the trigger, Lon's feet had risen like pistons. Bryan sprawled on his back and Lon was on top of him.

Then it seemed to be over, very suddenly. Bryan wasn't fighting back. He was only trying desperately to pull Lon's hands away from his throat.

"Lon, stop!" she begged frantically.

But Lon's arms were like steel bands and his eyes were dazed, unseeing. "I promised Jonesy I'd kill him."

Seconds were precious. Another instant and Lon would do something he could never live down. Jude reached for the gun she had dropped and struck Lon across his temple.

He fell like a log and lay still. Her breath tearing from her lungs in painful

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sobs, Jude dropped to her knees beside him and felt for his heart. It was beating, faint but steadily, and she grew dizzy with relief.

When Lon came back to consciousness, he lay in the yard, tied hand and foot with stiff leather thongs. Nearby Bryan Hodges lay, similarly bound.

When Lon struggled to sit up, **Jude** hurried to help him.

"What's the idea, Jude? Let me loose."

The bewildered, hurt look in his eyes tore at her but she answered steadily. "I'm not letting you loose, Lon. Not until help comes. I think when Peck gets back with the soldiers, they'll be riding over this way to look for us."

"But that might be night," he said angrily. "And my head hurts. Why did you hit me?"

She knelt beside him and raised his bruised face with a gentle hand. "To stop you from committing murder, Lon. To keep you free." And she laid her lips on his in a kiss that was long and sweet.

When she raised her face, she saw that the glow in her heart was reflected in his eyes. "Isn't that sweeter than revenge, Lon?"

He looked at her steadily and his voice was wistful. "I'd like you to understand, Jude. Sometimes revenge is all mixed up with a man's self respect. Unless I kept that respect I wouldn't have love fit to offer you."

Jude smiled happily. "It wasn't Luella, then?" she probed, wanting to hear more.

"It's been you, Jude, since the first time I ever saw you in Dodge City—with him. And in all fairness to you I've got to tell you something. Bryan Hodges never told me he was going into the Territory without you. I think he meant to marry you, if that trouble hadn't come up that night."

Just then their ears caught the drumming of horses' hoofs. Jude jumped to her feet. From down the creek came riders, a half dozen of them.

"It's Peck. Lon! He's bringing the soldiers. He must have met them much sooner than we'd hoped."

The cavalrymen swept into the yard and their leader dismounted and walked over. "What's going on here? Who are these men and why have you tied them up?"

"That one," Jude indicated the groaning Bryan, "is a murderer. I have his signed confession here. He is also a Sooner who refused to leave when he was ordered to. And if that isn't enough, Sergeant, I found this in the house."

She held up a huge, feathered headpiece, such as the Indians once wore in battle. "That shows he was one of the bunch that tried scaring us out. . . . He's all yours, Sergeant."

"And this one?" the army man asked, looking curiously at Lon.

"He's all mine," Jude told him. "I just wanted to be sure he stayed that way."

When the cavalrymen had ridden off with their prisoner, Jude untied Lon and showed him the bill of sale from Bryan Hodges. He looked at it, then caught her close in his arms.

"A Garden of Eden—and it's all yours," he said huskily.

There was the sound of wagon wheels, and they looked up to see the Peck wagon turning into the yard. Ma Peck drove and Bud sat beside her, a broad triumphant grin on his freckled face, his slingshot in his hand. And next to him was Luella, pale faced, with a white bandage about her glossy head.

Lon groaned. "And here comes the snake. Well, it's up to you to chase her out, Pepper. You're good at that sort of thing."

"And I'm going to stay good at it," Jude promised grimly. Roughly she pulled his face down to meet hers, held his lips with her own. That ought to tell Luella Hardy!

THE END

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RANGELAND LOVE STORIES

(Continued from page 10)

I'm 5 ft. 5 in. tall and weigh 125 lbs. My hair is brown and my eyes are blue. I'm 16 years old.

I live 17 miles from Florida's "Cattle Capital" and we're surrounded by ranches. I guess you might say I live in the cow country.

I'm daring any young cowboys to write me, but they better be real cowboys *or else!* You see, I'm a tomboy.

I'll answer all letters and exchange photographs too, so let's see some letters.

FRANCES FLINTOFT
1415½ W. Long Street
Orlando, Fla.

From the South Pacific

Dear Editor:

I would like for you to put my letter in your pen pards column, as I would like to have some gals to write to.

I am from Portland, Oregon, and have lived there all my life. I joined the Navy when I was 17 years old and am 19 now. I am 5 ft. 10 in. tall, have brown hair and hazel eyes. I weigh 147 lbs.

I am a long way from home now. I am on the island of Guam and have been here for a year and a half so far.

I'll be waiting to hear from some of you gals, so don't wait too long.

RAYMOND HANNA—SHSN
Box E Com Marianas
c/o FPO San Francisco, Calif.

Secretary-To-Be

Dear Editor:

I would like to have pen pals from all over the United States and the rest of the world.

I am 18, 5 ft. 3 in. tall, have brown hair and hazel eyes. I like to swim, sew, read and almost anything else. My hobby is collecting postage stamps from all over the world.

I want to hear from boys and girls of all ages and I will try to answer every letter.

I am originally from a farm, but I am now attending a business college in Fort Wayne.

CAROLE DEEN WHITE
2209 South Calhoun St.
Ft. Wayne, Ind.

Looks like that's all the letters we can crowd onto the range this time. If you'd like to have your plea published in this column, send it in to Pen Pards, c/o RANGELAND LOVE STORIES, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

Until next issue—*hasta la vista!*

(Continued from page 34)

"For a day or two, probably. I'll take care of that. And you, Ginnie? What are you going to do about Vince Taber?"

"Nothing," she murmured. "There won't be anything to do. Not now. Now that I've found you." And her face tilted until her mouth was directly beneath his, waiting and soft with warmth.

He kissed her, ignoring the watching men. Kissed her until golden flame raced through her senses.

When he put her down, the winged feeling died. She said slowly: "But nothing that's happened settles the problem of the squatters."

"Maybe it'll start getting settled now. Maybe we can convince the lawmen of the district they've got to start hunting the real criminals, whether they're squatters or outlaws, instead of charging everything that happens to the ex-prospectors. If they prove some of them are guilty of rustling and all the other things the cattlemen claim, then I'll help drive out the guilty ones. Until then we'll just have to fight for decency. For fairness. Want to help me, Ginnie?"

"Ye-es. But how?"

"Like this," he murmured and once more he took her in his arms.

THE END

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of Rangeland Love Stories, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana, for October 1, 1951. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: New Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholders or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me, this 19th day of September, 1951. Eva M. Walker, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in New York County, No. 31-9506600. Certificate filed with: City Register N. Y. County. My Commission expires March 30, 1952 (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

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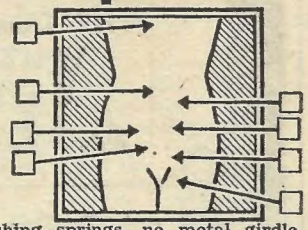

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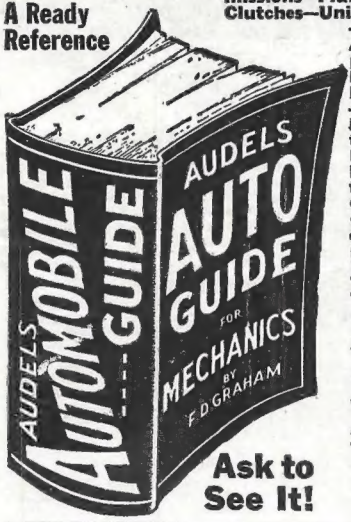

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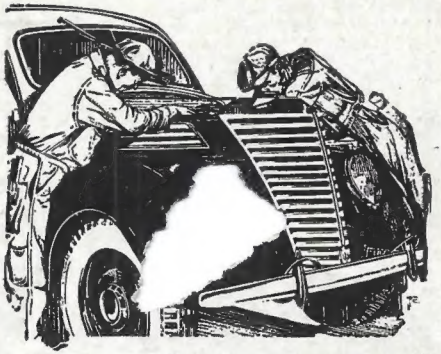

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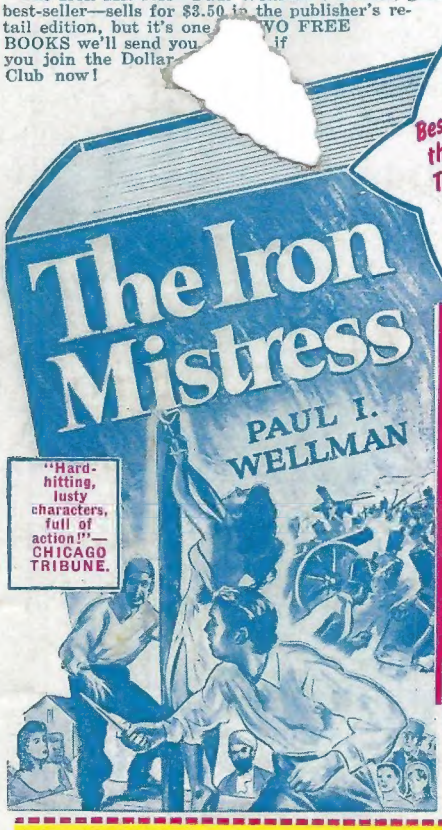

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